



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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

**Volume 139**  
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# Assembly Members

## A

Aiken, Dr 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)

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

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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)

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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 (Speaker)  
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)  
Muir, Andrew (North Down)  
Mullan, Ms Karen (Foyle)  
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)

## N

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

## O

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

## P

Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)

## R

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

## S

Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)  
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)  
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)  
Stewart, John (East Antrim)  
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)  
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)  
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Wells, Jim (South Down)  
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# Ministerial Offices

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Deputy First Minister.....	Mrs Michelle O’Neill
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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

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The Executive Office .....	Mr Declan Kearney Mr Gordon Lyons
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# Official Report (Hansard)



# Assembly Sittings





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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 4 May 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** Before we commence the sitting, I inform Members that I have been advised that Mr Gary Middleton will not introduce the Adjournment topic today. The sitting will adjourn immediately after the motion to approve the corporate insolvency regulations.

## Matter of the Day

### Centenary of Northern Ireland

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Jim Allister has been given leave to make a statement on the centenary of Northern Ireland, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members who are called shall have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

**Mr Allister:** Yesterday marked the centenary of Northern Ireland as a separate political and legal entity within the United Kingdom. Therefore, it also marked the centenary of the United Kingdom in the form that we currently know it. That, for many of us, is an occasion for considerable thankfulness and celebration.

Northern Ireland came into existence and continues to exist because of the will of its people. That is despite external and internal aggression. Externally, of course, for decades, our nearest southern neighbour overtly claimed our territory and allowed its territory to be used to facilitate the launch of terrorist attacks, and, internally, of course, we have had the besetting of vicious terrorism.

Northern Ireland is, indeed, a triumph of democracy over terrorism. Having faced all that vicious terrorism, I want today to salute the memory of the many who selflessly gave their life to stand between the law-abiding people of Northern Ireland and the evildoers in our midst.

Of course, Northern Ireland has also been subjected to relentless insult and vilification, including by those who tell us what the standards of respect are that are expected of us all, but Northern Ireland is still here and is flourishing as part of the United Kingdom. Scholars, sportsmen, inventors, generals, captains of industry, leaders in medicine: we have proudly produced them all and much more besides. I am proud of Northern Ireland. I am proud to call it home.

Looking forward, as in the past, we cannot be complacent to the threat that faces us. Vigilance served us in the past. Vigilance will serve us in the future, along with the determination to defeat any threat that comes along, including the current threat of the iniquitous protocol.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Allister:** That determination against —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Allister:** — those who want to see us overcome and who wish the Province ill —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Allister:** — from within and without.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Buckley:** It is with immense pride and joy that I stand in the House today to welcome and mark the centenary of the country that I love and cherish. Undoubtedly, Northern Ireland means a lot of different things to many people, but one thing that we, regardless of community background, can all take huge pride in is its people. Be it in war, on the sporting field, in civic society, in industry or in medicine, Northern Ireland has punched well above its weight across the world. I am proud to call this place home, and I recognise that it is a shared home place.

I look forward to the next century with optimism. As the youngest unionist in this place, I am not oblivious to the threats that face the union and face Northern Ireland. As a young unionist with hope, I look forward to the next interesting time in our lives and in the development of this country, but I must mark and recognise the huge contribution and sacrifice of so many. Today, I think about my great-uncle Bobby Crozier, who was killed by a terrorist act at Glenanne army camp as he donned the uniform to protect its citizens. Today, I think about the many families of those who donned the uniform to defend this nation and ensure that we could reach this historic milestone in our nation's life. Their sacrifice is not in vain, and I pledge to them, in their memory, to their families and, indeed, to the community that I represent that I will do all within my power to make sure that this place prospers in the next century and that it is seen and recognised as a welcoming place for those who may not share my community background or history.

Northern Ireland is a place that we can all rightly call home. Northern Ireland is a place that should be welcoming to all. That is the spirit in which I look to the next 100 years. I look to it with positivity, and I invite colleagues, yes, to reflect on the past but to look forward with optimism and to mark the centenary with the respect that it deserves.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Quite clearly, there will be different perspectives on the events of 100 years ago, and it would be quite easy to rise to the bait of Mr Allister's usual angry performance.

However, we have to reflect on what those 100 years have meant to all who live on this island and, indeed, across these islands and on what the future will look like. Mr Buckley's comments on the future were important. He is the youngest unionist in the House, and we need a vision for the young people and the not-so-young people who live on this island.

Ireland was partitioned by the Government of Ireland Act. In my opinion, which many share, that was the wrong thing to do to Ireland. It created division, and it created a state that systematically discriminated against a large proportion of its citizens. It created laws such as the Special Powers Act that were the envy of the apartheid South African regime. That is not democracy.

We can look forward, I think, to a new future. The Government of Ireland Act was repealed as part of the

Good Friday Agreement, and the Good Friday Agreement is why we all sit here today and why we share power today. Of course, we still have our differences. We have our differences about what the future will hold, but I am confident that the future will be different from the past, both in how the past was created and in how it was enforced. I believe that democracy, that much-used word, will create a new beginning on the island of Ireland, where Protestant and Dissenter can live alongside the Catholic and the nationalist and all of those other traditions that are coming forward and that a new Ireland will be a home place to us all. I do not know what that new Ireland will look like, but I firmly believe that we now have the mechanisms in place to ensure that it is a shared place, that the mistakes of the past can be learned from and that the generation of Mr Buckley and those in the Chamber who may be slightly greyer in the head will have a better time.

I will end on this note. A young republican said to me a number of years ago, "We will be the generation that lives for Ireland. No more should any generation die for Ireland". That has to be the ambition for us all.

**Mr O'Toole:** We talk a lot about history in this place, perhaps a little too much. It is probably fair to say that we definitely talk about it too much. It is, however, the 100th anniversary of the passing of the Government of Ireland Act, the partition of Ireland and the creation of the jurisdiction of Northern Ireland, all of which were, clearly, historically significant moments. They were part of a decade of disruption on the island of Ireland that began in 1912. The decade of centenaries will run right through to the centenary of the conclusion of the Irish civil war. That decade 100 years ago brought about enormous disruption.

Rather than seeking to score points from history, it is important to set out and acknowledge two broad truths about the partition of Ireland. The first is that the disruption that took place as a result of the Government of Ireland Act was, in part, a reflection of the fact that a substantial minority of people on the island did not feel that they wanted to be part of, first, a home rule Ireland and, secondly, an independent Ireland. The second truth is that the partition of Ireland was, in my view and certainly that of my party, not the best way of reacting to that dissent. It created what was for a very long time a deeply unjust state. It would therefore be wrong to mark this day without acknowledging both of those truths: there was a substantial minority in this part of the island with a distinct identity, but the jurisdiction created by partition was deeply unjust and, indeed, the act of partition severed many families, communities and geographies in a way that is regrettable and traumatic to this day.

You only have to go to the west bank of the River Foyle in the city of Derry. It is sometimes forgotten that the city side of Derry is all on the Inishowen peninsula, and what surrounds it is both a wide river, the River Foyle, and an international border. While acknowledging the distinctness of this part of Ireland, it is also necessary for us to acknowledge the deep hurt that was caused by partition. However, that is history. As Mr O'Dowd said, what we in this place should be about is making the present better and building a better future. That is the only future for people on this island, particularly in this part of Ireland, whatever your constitutional preference.

My constitutional preference, and that of my party, is that we, on the basis of reconciliation, remove the

border on the island of Ireland. However, any of us with a constitutional preference, whether to maintain the Union with the United Kingdom or to remove the border in Ireland, can do so only on the basis of reconciliation, mutual respect and sharing this place. That should be the lesson of our history, and the lesson that we all take forward as we build the future.

10.45 am

**Dr Aiken:** I thank Mr Allister for bringing this Matter of the Day to the Assembly.

Today marks the first day of our next century. It should be a century of pride, because we can take a lot of pride in what we have achieved. There is a lot to commemorate and to reflect on.

Yesterday, I spent the morning at a church service, which was quite remarkable in that it was led by someone from what I call the “new Northern Ireland”. The minister is from Scandinavia, and she sees herself very much as part of this new Northern Ireland. The music director — I declare an interest here — was my wife, and she is American. The whole church service was not about fear or anything like that. It was about hope for the future. It was interesting to speak to some of the younger people who were at the service. I asked them how they viewed Northern Ireland, and they said that they were very happy with the way it is. There are things wrong with Northern Ireland, but there are things wrong all over the place — with the Irish Republic, Europe and the United States.

When you sit back and think about it, Northern Ireland is not a bad place to be. We have so much opportunity, and we have the greatest natural resource of all: our people. Yes, our people need to be looked after. We need a proper health service, which we are trying to build, and an education system that educates our children together rather than separately. We need an economy based on the future, which deals with the challenges that we will face as a result of climate change and other issues. We must grab the opportunities for things like fintech and other new emerging technologies. We can do that.

This is a time for hope. We should all look forward confidently together and do that in a manner in which we all work closely with one another. That is what the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was all about: transforming Northern Ireland and getting ready for the future.

We can look back on all sorts of things and say that we did not want to see such things. I could use Her Majesty’s words to express that. However, our most important task, as an Assembly and as politicians, is to look confidently to the future and the next 100 years. Let us make Northern Ireland work for everybody.

**Mr Muir:** As Northern Ireland hits its 100th anniversary, I respect the fact that there are many perspectives on that in society and in the Chamber.

I love Northern Ireland and consider it my home, but I want to build a future based on respect and reconciliation. What makes Northern Ireland unique is its people. I am so proud of the people who make up Northern Ireland. That is what makes me happy to call the place home. However, I recognise the history of this place and that, at far too many times, people did not feel at home, and discrimination was prevalent. That discrimination affected many people,

including members of my family. I am conscious of that and also of the hurt that was caused to many as a result of the violence in our past.

As we look over the last 100 years, it is important that we take learnings from the past, which will enable us to consider and appreciate different viewpoints. Some of the events that have been organised recently by your office, Mr Speaker, have been very worthwhile, and I commend you for organising them. The BBC has a podcast, ‘Year ‘21’, which I found very useful. We can benefit from engaging with and learning from our past.

As other Members said, the Queen issued a statement yesterday, which, for me, was very welcome. It follows on from the call made by King George V at the opening of the Northern Ireland Parliament many years ago. He called on people:

*“to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation”.*

As we look to the future, that future must be based firmly on reconciliation. President Higgins said recently:

*“The whole purpose is not to allow some event of the past have the capacity to disable you in the present and remove options for the future from you.”*

That is so true.

Northern Ireland society has drastically changed. It is a wonderful rainbow of minorities and a great society to be part of. The future, however, must be about continuing that progress, which must be about being an open, welcoming and more equal place that attracts and retains people, talent and jobs. We have it in our gift to create that future society, which is about celebrating and embracing diversity. I encourage everyone to grasp it.

**Mr Carroll:** People Before Profit does not support the idea that the centenary of partition is something to be celebrated. Everything in the North is pitched within the binary framework of the two traditions, where people are expected to be either unionist or nationalist. As a James Connolly socialist, I firmly reject that narrative. While some may want to, we are not about sitting on the fence when faced with so-called divisive issues; we are about kicking down fences and challenging division, and that necessitates challenging partition.

Partition was a reactionary and undemocratic development that was used to thwart progressive and revolutionary change in Ireland. Look at the history of partition: it was undemocratically imposed on Ireland and backed by sectarianism and the widespread use of violence. That included having battalions of the British Army here, sectarian policing, the gerrymandering of electoral boundaries to ensure unionist power and a deep level of discrimination against the minority nationalist community in housing, jobs and the democratic franchise.

Of course, it is worth remembering that, in the aftermath of partition, many radical Protestants were expelled from the workforce, as they were deemed to be a threat to the state. Such was the nature of the injustices enshrined in the Northern state that it took mass upheaval through peaceful protest to challenge discrimination. The civil rights movement in the late 1960s was, of course, met with violence and repression by the unionist Government and

the British military, creating the context for a sustained period of violence.

As James Connolly said it would, partition created a “carnival of reaction” on both sides of the border: in the South, a state based on the oppressive power of the Catholic Church that locked women up; and, in the North, an orange state in the image of the Unionist Party and the Orange Order. Partition created permanent divisions that have been cynically exploited by elites on both sides of the border to keep workers and ordinary people in their place. Partition has firmly held back progress on both sides of the border.

We want to learn from history for sure, but we are not for celebrating the anniversary of partition. We want to see a socialist Ireland based on equality, justice and solidarity, where there is a world without borders and without imperialist war. It is true to say that the old world is dying and the new world is fighting to be born. In that fight, our party will be a socialist voice for challenging both states, North and South, in the interests of working-class people across the board.

**Mr Stalford:** It is ironic to be lectured about the creation of a new world by someone who, I suspect, regrets the fall of the Berlin Wall.

I will speak briefly about previous generations and then move on to talk about what we can do for future generations. I place on the record of the House my appreciation of the generation that created this state, the generation led by men such as Edward Carson and James Craig and that contributed to the victory of this country in the Great War at the Battle of the Somme. They are the founding fathers of Northern Ireland, and my children are full United Kingdom citizens because of the contribution of that generation. I will skip a generation and talk about the generation that kept the Atlantic open during the Second World War, that endured the blitz of this city and that made a contribution to the defeat of Hitlerism and fascism. Skipping forward another generation in the history of this country, I pay tribute to those who endured with bravery and stoicism the violent campaign of the Troubles, whether serving in the police, the armed forces or in any public service that kept this place going.

I was thinking about this the other day: my children will find it bizarre when I tell them that my mother had her bags searched when she went into Primark. Primark was on the news, and I was thinking that so much had happened in the history of this country that my children — all our children — will think, “How on earth did you live through that?”. We did, and we endured.

Going forward to this generation, it is important that we commit ourselves to working together to make this place work. That is why I found it very disappointing that a party-political banner was erected on the side of a block of flats and pointed in the direction of a unionist community. That was nothing more than a calculated insult, and it is not within the spirit of the statement that the Queen issued when she said:

*“Across generations, the people of Northern Ireland are choosing to build an inclusive, prosperous, and hopeful society, strengthened by the gains of the peace process.”*

It is our job and the job of all elected to this place to build that society, to make this place work and to pass it on better to the next generation.

**Mr Catney:** Jonathan Buckley said that he was the youngest unionist, but, looking around, I think that I am the oldest nationalist here *[Laughter.]*

**A Member:** What about Jim?

**Mr Catney:** I am not going to call Jim anything close to a nationalist.

I want to follow on from Matthew. As a young man of maybe 22, I made my first sortie into Belfast to buy a little bar called the Liverpool Bar. The bar used to close when the two ships — either the Ulster Prince or the Ulster Queen — left for Liverpool. However, on those first days, I remember coming from the country. It was only 18 miles away, but Belfast was a different place from what it is now. People came to take the cheap ferry boat to Australia, and hundreds left every night. I saw them crying on Donegal Quay because they thought that they would never see their loved ones or family again as they were leaving this place.

As I said, I worked during the Troubles, as they were called, and I made a good living for myself and my family in Northern Ireland. This is my home, just as everyone else has said it is their home. I was born into this home, but there were problems. We cannot deny the problems that we had. We have inflicted hurt and pain on each other, and that is a pity — what a pity. I heard Mr Stalford talk about keeping the Atlantic open, and, as I have said before, my father’s younger brother was blown up off the coast of Tenerife. We have a shared history. I love traditional Irish music, I love the song, and I love my Irish language: that should be shared. No one should own it; it belongs to every one of us. It was given to us by our Presbyterian forefathers, who wrote down the music and lyrics of the blind harper that we can still play and recite today.

I believe that Northern Ireland was born out of an undemocratic situation. The majority of Irish people — 78% — voted in favour of home rule, the agreed principle of that vote. The next line, for me as a democrat, was the Good Friday Agreement; it contains all our truths and all the things that we share. We should be the generation that bends over backwards to accept and work with that document to make it work for us, our children and our children’s children, and that should be our pledge.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member’s time is up.

**Mr Poots:** I appreciate the opportunity that the Assembly has taken to mark the 100th anniversary of Northern Ireland. It has been a period when we have had many good, positive things and many people who have excelled.

Harry Ferguson was a great inventor. My dad bought a farm off him many years ago, and it is something that we really cherish. Poets such as Seamus Heaney, writers such as C. S. Lewis, actors such as Liam Neeson, footballers such as George Best and Pat Jennings, snooker players such as Alex Higgins and Dennis Taylor and motorcycle racers such as Joey Dunlop and young Jonathan Rea have all demonstrated that Northern Ireland people can achieve greatness. They have made great contributions here and in many other parts of the world.

11.00 am

I am a proud Northern Ireland man. All of its people are tremendous, friendly, kind and caring people. The scourge of the Troubles, which was inflicted for 25 years, was a disaster for Northern Ireland and for everyone in Northern Ireland. Not one of the bullets fired in the Troubles was justified. No one deserved to lose their life, and we can never return to that.

Let us look forward to a further 100 years. Others will achieve greatness, but hundreds, thousands and millions of our people will continue to be caring and loving people who are generous to others in need. Northern Ireland has had many great things to show and has many great things to come. We can move forward confidently and in a way that will ensure that people who have many benefits from being part of the United Kingdom and of that great Union will continue to have those benefits, which are not available elsewhere. We need to recognise that they are not available elsewhere and that doing anything other than being in this great Union will ensure that people will have less disposable income, less access to free healthcare and so many other things.

I am confident of a bright future for Northern Ireland within the Union. I celebrate the 100 years that we have had and look forward to leaving a Northern Ireland that is a great place for future generations to enjoy.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the debate on the Matter of the Day. Members, please take your ease for a moment.

## Executive Committee Business

### Pension Schemes Bill: Consideration Stage

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, to move the Bill.

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

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

There is a single group of amendments, amendment Nos 1 to 20, which deal with technical and consequential amendments to schedule 3. Once the debate on the group is completed, any further amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

*Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 3 to 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 7 to 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 13 to 19 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 20 to 33 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 34 to 35 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 36 to 40 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 41 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 42 to 45 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Schedule 1 agreed to.*

*Schedule 2 agreed to.*

#### **Schedule 3 (Minor and Consequential Amendments)**

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the single group of technical and consequential amendments for debate. With amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 2 to 20. I call the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, to move amendment No 1 and to address the other amendments in the group.

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):** I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 43, line 32, leave out “at the end add” and insert “after sub-paragraph (xii) insert”.

*The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:*

No 2: In page 43, line 35, leave out “at the end add” and insert “after sub-paragraph (ix) insert”.— *[Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]*

No 3: In page 43, line 40, leave out “at the end add” and insert “after sub-paragraph (xi) insert”.— *[Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]*

No 4: In page 43, line 43, leave out “at the end add” and insert “after sub-paragraph (ix) insert”.— *[Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]*

No 5: In page 44, line 27, leave out head (b).— *[Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]*

No 6: In page 44, line 28, leave out head (c) and insert -“(c) at the end add ‘, or’.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 7: In page 44, line 36, at end insert -  
“9A. In Article 68 (inspection of premises), in paragraph (2) before sub-paragraph (e) insert —  
(dc) the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.’.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 8: In page 44, line 36, at end insert -  
“9B. In Article 72A (fixed penalty notices), in paragraph (6) after ‘2008’ insert ‘or section 17 of the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020’.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 9: In page 44, line 36, at end insert -  
“9C. In Article 72B (escalating penalty notices), in paragraph (8) after ‘2008’ insert ‘or section 18 of the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020’.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 10: In page 44, line 36, at end insert -  
“9D. In Article 75 (offences of providing false or misleading information), in paragraph (1)(c)—  
(a) omit the ‘or’ at the end of head (iv); and  
(b) in head (v), at the end add ‘, or  
(vi) the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.’.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 11: In page 44, line 36, at end insert -  
“9E. In Article 75A (financial penalty for providing false or misleading information to Regulator), in paragraph (2)(c)—  
(a) omit the ‘or’ at the end of head (iv); and  
(b) in head (v), at the end add ‘, or  
(vi) the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.’.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 12: In page 44, line 39, leave out “after sub-paragraph (j)” and insert “before sub-paragraph (k)”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 13: In page 45, line 5, leave out sub-paragraph (3) and insert -  
“(3) In paragraph (6), in the definition of ‘the pensions legislation’ at the end add ‘, or  
(h) the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.’.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 14: In page 45, line 10, leave out from “omit” to “paragraph” on line 11 and insert “before sub-paragraph (q)”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 15: In page 45, line 15, leave out “after sub-paragraph (ta)” and insert “before sub-paragraph (u)”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 16: In page 45, line 26, at end insert -  
“12A. In Schedule 1 (the Pensions Regulator), in Part 1 (delegation), in paragraph 2(2), after head (o) add—  
(p) the power to issue a fixed penalty notice under section 17 of the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020;

(q) the power to issue an escalating penalty notice under section 18 of that Act.’.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 17: In page 45, line 27, leave out from “after” to “4” on line 28 and insert “before Part 5”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 18: In page 46, line 4, leave out “after paragraph (b)” and insert “at the end”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 19: In page 46, line 8, leave out from “after” to “(b)” on line 9 and insert “at the end”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

No 20: In page 46, line 14, at end insert -  
“The Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020  
15.—(1) Section 17 (fixed penalty notice for failure to comply with request for information) is amended as follows.  
(2) In the heading, at the end insert ‘etc’.  
(3) In subsection (1)—  
(a) for ‘with a’ substitute ‘with—  
(a) a’;  
(b) after ‘Part’ insert ‘, or  
(b) a notice issued under Article 67A of that Order (interviews), so far as relevant to the exercise of any of the Regulator’s functions under or by virtue of this Part.’.  
16.—(1) Section 18 (escalating penalty notice for failure to comply with request for information) is amended as follows.  
(2) In the heading, at the end insert ‘etc’.  
(3) In subsection (1)—  
(a) for ‘with a’ substitute ‘with—  
(a) a’;  
(b) after ‘notice’)’ insert ‘, or  
(b) a notice issued under Article 67A of that Order (interviews), so far as relevant to the exercise of any of the Regulator’s functions under or by virtue of this Part (an ‘Article 67A notice’)’.  
(4) In subsection (2)(a), after ‘67 notice’ insert ‘or the Article 67A notice’.  
(5) In subsection (3), after ‘67 notice’ insert ‘or an Article 67A notice’.  
(6) In subsection (6)—  
(a) in paragraph (b), after ‘notice’ insert ‘or the Article 67A notice’;  
(b) in paragraph (e), after ‘notice’ insert ‘or the Article 67A notice’.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

The amendments are technical and consequential amendments in consequence of the Westminster Pensions Schemes Act 2021. Members may recall that, on 1 June 2020 and 2 November 2020, the House agreed legislative consent motions relating to the provisions of the Westminster Pensions Schemes Bill, which extends here.

The Westminster Bill has completed its passage through Parliament and is now the Pensions Schemes Act 2021.

The Act provides for collective money purchase schemes where contributions are pooled and invested to deliver an aspired benefit level. It strengthens protections for scheme members, enhances the powers of the regulator and introduces stronger sanctions for those who harm their pension schemes. It aims to increase the transparency about individuals' pensions by introducing pensions dashboards and introduces provisions to tackle pension scams.

The Bill and the Westminster Pensions Schemes Act 2021 amend the same provisions in a number of cases. That has led to a conflict in the numbering of the new provisions inserted by the Bill and the Act, as, at the outset, it was unclear which would progress more quickly. As the Westminster Pensions Schemes Act 2021 has now been enacted, amendments to the Bill are necessary to rectify the conflict in numbering. In some instances, the Assembly's Bill Office can manage the correction of the numbering, but technical amendments to schedule 3 to the Bill are also required as a consequence of the repositioning, the renumbered provisions being inserted and some conjunctions.

Amendment Nos 1 to 6, 12 to 15 and 17 to 19 make the necessary technical amendments to reposition the renumbered provisions being inserted and some conjunctions. They do not denote new policy. Seven further amendments are also necessary to carry amendments to provisions of our law that could not be made by the Westminster Pensions Schemes Act 2021 as the Bill had not completed its passage through the Assembly. Those amendments are necessary to maintain the parity and interlinked provisions in the Bill with other private pensions legislation in a coherent way. Those consequential amendments are technical, for example in order to add references to the Bill in a number of provisions amended by the Westminster Act. Amendment Nos 7 to 11, 16 and 20 make those necessary amendments. They do not denote the policy and, in line with legislative consent motions, would have been carried in the Westminster 2021 Act had the current Bill been enacted.

I will run briefly through the amendments. As I mentioned, amendment Nos 1 to 6, 12 to 15 and 17 to 19 make the necessary technical amendments to reposition provisions that have been renumbered and make the associated grammatical changes. Amendment Nos 7 to 11 insert new paragraphs 9A to 9E in schedule 3. They amend articles 68, 72A, 72B, 75 and 75A of the Pensions (NI) Order 2005, which are articles that have either been amended or inserted by the Westminster Pension Schemes Act 2021. The amendments made by paragraphs 9A to 9E are necessary to add a reference to the current Bill into provisions in those articles that refer to the relevant legislation here. Paragraphs 10 and 21 of schedule 8 to the Westminster Pension Schemes Act 2021 amend articles 68 and 75 retrospectively of the Pensions (NI) Order 2005. Paragraph 11 of the schedule inserts articles 72A and 72B, and paragraph 12 inserts article 75A into the 2005 Order. In the corresponding Westminster provision, the Act includes a reference to the Pension Schemes Act 2017, which is the Westminster analogue to the Bill. As the Bill had not completed its passage through the Assembly, the Westminster Act could not include a reference to the Bill

or to articles 68, 72A, 72B, 75 and 75A. The references, therefore, have to be added by the Bill.

Amendment No 16 inserts new paragraph 12A into schedule 3. That new paragraph amends paragraph 2(2) of schedule 1 to the Pensions (NI) Order 2005 to add in the references of provisions in the Bill relating to fixed penalty notices and escalating penalty notices. Paragraph 27 of schedule 8 to the Westminster Pension Schemes Act 2021 amends paragraph 2(2) of schedule 1 to the 2005 Order. In the corresponding Westminster provision, the Act includes a reference to the Pension Schemes Act 2017. Again, as the Bill had not completed its passage, it was not included in those provisions of the Bill in paragraph 2(2) of schedule 1 to the 2005 Order. The reference, therefore, has been added by the Bill.

Amendment No 20 inserts paragraphs 15 and 16 into schedule 3. The new paragraphs carry amendments to clauses 17 and 18. Once enacted, the amendments cannot be made to the Bill as it stands, as they need to be commenced at a future date in tandem with the corresponding changes to the Pension Schemes Act 2017, which is the Westminster analogue to the current Bill.

Paragraphs 18 to 20 of schedule 7 to the Westminster Pension Schemes Act 2021 amend sections 17 and 18 of the Pension Schemes Act 2017. As the Bill has not completed its passage through the Assembly, the Act could not make the corresponding amendments for the North. The amendments, therefore, have to be made by the Bill. The intention is that the amendments will be commenced at the same time as the corresponding amendments to the Westminster Act.

In conclusion, I restate that the amendments are in consequence of the Westminster Pension Schemes Act 2021 and do not denote new policy.

**Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):** The Committee for Communities welcomes the Consideration Stage of the Bill, which, overall, is designed to safeguard workers' pensions and introduce a welcome new regulatory framework for master trusts in Northern Ireland. Over the past few years, there have been sweeping changes to pensions, and master trusts have become very popular. The Committee was first briefed on the Bill by departmental officials on 17 June 2020, and members were reassured that the Bill will ensure that no master trust scheme can operate without authorisation from the Pensions Regulator and that specific requirements must be met.

The Committee reported on the Pension Schemes Bill on 19 November 2020, having considered the Bill at eight meetings and taken oral evidence from the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe), the Workers Pension Trust and the Pensions Regulator.

#### 11.15 am

During Committee Stage, officials advised the Committee that a number of amendments would be necessary at Consideration Stage in consequence of the Westminster Pension Schemes Bill, which, at that time, was before Parliament. The Westminster Bill has completed its passage through Parliament and is now the Pension Schemes Act 2021.

I take this opportunity to thank the officials — Gerry McCann and Doreen Roy — for all their assistance during Committee Stage and their patience with technical explanations and subsequent briefings on these amendments. The Committee was briefed by the officials at its meeting on 22 April on the text of the amendments that we are considering, and the officials outlined their purpose.

The Committee was content that they did not represent new policy or change to the original policy intent of the Bill. The Committee also noted that legislative consent motions in relation to the Westminster Pension Schemes Act 2021 were agreed by the Assembly on 1 June and 2 November 2020. The Committee was content that the amendments were technical, drafting and consequential amendments required to the Pension Schemes Bill as a result of the Pension Schemes Act 2021.

**Ms Mullan:** Having recently joined the Committee for Communities, I welcome this opportunity to speak on the Pension Schemes Bill, which has been making its way through the various stages for several months now.

The Bill, as I understand it, aims to provide additional safeguards for pension scheme members through a variety of mechanisms. Over the years, the manner in which people manage and access their pensions has changed. It is vital that the regulations keep pace with that and provide the necessary protections.

The amendments are technical in nature. I thank the Minister and her officials for providing the detail and the rationale for bringing them forward. As we have heard, as a result of the Westminster Pension Schemes Act progressing ahead of the Pension Schemes Bill, they focus largely on changes to numbering and ordering as well as additional references not currently included. The amendments also ensure that the Bill's provisions are interlinked with other pensions legislation in place here.

I thank the research team and the departmental officials who provided briefings to support the scrutiny of the Bill so far for their time and expertise.

I am content that these amendments do not make any policy changes, and therefore I support them.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill back for Consideration Stage.

My hesitancy around the LCMs and accelerated passage for any Bill, let alone a Bill that will impact on all pension savers throughout the North, is on record. However, I do acknowledge and have acknowledged that there was a huge element of urgency with this Bill as a result of the Assembly's three-year hiatus, which had already placed pension scheme members here at a disadvantage to their counterparts in Britain. This Bill, however, will bolster protections for pension savers, providing people with a safety net of assurances surrounding their pension schemes. It is, therefore, vital that those safeguards are implemented without further delay.

One key issue discussed at Committee was the exponential increase in members of master trusts in the North. Members recognised the need for inbuilt protections but were reassured that, when master trusts do not have access to a pension protection fund, there is a safety net in the event of fraud. Likewise the fact that the Pensions Regulator will have a role in regulating cross-border

schemes and can intervene, if necessary, is very much welcome.

Assurance was sought, because of the Committee's nervousness, about potential changes to the Bill that would happen at Westminster on which we would not have a say. We got assurances that we would, and we are having that today.

As for the amendments, we certainly support them. I appreciate that they have been detailed by the Minister and the Chair, but I highlight those made in relation to supporting a cap on exit charges on certain occupational pension schemes. That cap, in many instances, has acted as a barrier, preventing many individuals from accessing their pension savings. It is important that we remove that barrier and provide certain levels of flexibility and freedoms. The new provisions in relation to a ban on member-borne commission charges are similarly welcome.

The Bill will improve pension schemes. It will make them safer, and it will make them greener. We support the amendments and the Bill.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Minister for Communities to make a winding-up speech.

**Ms Hargey:** Again, thanks very much to the Chair and members of the Committee for Communities for taking the briefings from Gerry and Doreen. A lot of the amendments are technical in that they are consequential to the legislation. I appreciate the manner in which the Committee approached the Bill, and I urge the House to support it.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Members.

*Amendment No 1 agreed to.*

*Amendment No 2 made:*

In page 43, line 35, leave out "at the end add" and insert "after sub-paragraph (ix) insert".— [*Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).*]

*Amendment No 3 made:*

In page 43, line 40, leave out "at the end add" and insert "after sub-paragraph (xi) insert".— [*Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).*]

*Amendment No 4 made:*

In page 43, line 43, leave out "at the end add" and insert "after sub-paragraph (ix) insert".— [*Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).*]

*Amendment No 5 made:*

In page 44, line 27, leave out head (b).— [*Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).*]

*Amendment No 6 made:*

In page 44, line 28, leave out head (c) and insert "(c) at the end add ' , or".— [*Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).*]

*Amendment No 7 made:*

In page 44, line 36, at end insert -

"9A. In Article 68 (inspection of premises), in paragraph (2) before sub-paragraph (e) insert —



*(dc) the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.*’— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

*Amendment No 8 made:*

In page 44, line 36, at end insert -

*“9B. In Article 72A (fixed penalty notices), in paragraph (6) after ‘2008’ insert ‘or section 17 of the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.’— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]*

*Amendment No 9 made:*

In page 44, line 36, at end insert -

*“9C. In Article 72B (escalating penalty notices), in paragraph (8) after ‘2008’ insert ‘or section 18 of the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.’— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]*

*Amendment No 10 made:*

In page 44, line 36, at end insert -

*“9D. In Article 75 (offences of providing false or misleading information), in paragraph (1)(c)—*

*(a) omit the ‘or’ at the end of head (iv); and*

*(b) in head (v), at the end add ‘, or*

*(vi) the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.’— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]*

*Amendment No 11 made:*

In page 44, line 36, at end insert -

*“9E. In Article 75A (financial penalty for providing false or misleading information to Regulator), in paragraph (2)(c)—*

*(a) omit the ‘or’ at the end of head (iv); and*

*(b) in head (v), at the end add ‘, or*

*(vi) the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.’— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]*

*Amendment No 12 made:*

In page 44, line 39, leave out “after sub-paragraph (j)” and insert “before sub-paragraph (k)”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

*Amendment No 13 made:*

In page 45, line 5, leave out sub-paragraph (3) and insert -

*“(3) In paragraph (6), in the definition of ‘the pensions legislation’ at the end add ‘, or*

*(h) the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.’— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]*

*Amendment No 14 made:*

In page 45, line 10, leave out from “omit” to “paragraph” on line 11 and insert “before sub-paragraph (q)”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

*Amendment No 15 made:*

In page 45, line 15, leave out “after sub-paragraph (ta)” and insert “before sub-paragraph (u)”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

*Amendment No 16 made:*

In page 45, line 26, at end insert -

*“12A. In Schedule 1 (the Pensions Regulator), in Part 1 (delegation), in paragraph 2(2), after head (o) add—*

*‘(p) the power to issue a fixed penalty notice under section 17 of the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020;*

*(q) the power to issue an escalating penalty notice under section 18 of that Act.’— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]*

*Amendment No 17 made:*

In page 45, line 27, leave out from “after” to “4” on line 28 and insert “before Part 5”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

*Amendment No 18 made:*

In page 46, line 4, leave out “after paragraph (b)” and insert “at the end”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

*Amendment No 19 made:*

In page 46, line 8, leave out from “after” to “(b)” on line 9 and insert “at the end”.— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

*Amendment No 20 made:*

In page 46, line 14, at end insert -

*“The Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2020*

*15.—(1) Section 17 (fixed penalty notice for failure to comply with request for information) is amended as follows.*

*(2) In the heading, at the end insert ‘etc’.*

*(3) In subsection (1)—*

*(a) for ‘with a’ substitute ‘with—*

*(a) a’;*

*(b) after ‘Part’ insert ‘, or*

*(b) a notice issued under Article 67A of that Order (interviews), so far as relevant to the exercise of any of the Regulator’s functions under or by virtue of this Part.’.*

*16.—(1) Section 18 (escalating penalty notice for failure to comply with request for information) is amended as follows.*

*(2) In the heading, at the end insert ‘etc’.*

*(3) In subsection (1)—*

*(a) for ‘with a’ substitute ‘with—*

*(a) a’;*

*(b) after ‘notice’)’ insert ‘, or*

*(b) a notice issued under Article 67A of that Order (interviews), so far as relevant to the exercise of any of the Regulator’s functions under or by virtue of this Part (an ‘Article 67A notice’).*

*(4) In subsection (2)(a), after ‘67 notice’ insert ‘or the Article 67A notice’.*

*(5) In subsection (3), after ‘67 notice’ insert ‘or an Article 67A notice’.*

*(6) In subsection (6)—*

(a) in paragraph (b), after 'notice' insert 'or the Article 67A notice';

(b) in paragraph (e), after 'notice' insert 'or the Article 67A notice'."— [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

Schedule 3, as amended, agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

**Mr Speaker:** Members, that concludes the Consideration Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

11.30 am

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

### **The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Members, the next items of business are motions to approve five statutory rules (SRs), all of which relate to the health protection regulations. There will be a single debate on all five motions. I will call the junior Minister to move the first motion. He will then commence the debate on all the motions, as listed in the Order Paper. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. That process will be repeated for the remaining SRs. If that is clear, I shall proceed.

**Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** I beg to move

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

*The following motions stood in the Order Paper:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate.

**Mr Kearney:** Junior Minister Lyons and I are bringing forward four statutory rules, Nos 71, 91, 93 and 97, that amend the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations. De ghnáth pléitear na leasuithe le comhaltai in ord na n-uimhreacha de réir mar atá siad leagtha. We normally take Members through the amendments by number. This morning, we will be taking through the amendments made between the principal regulations, namely the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations, and the new set, which commenced on 9 April 2021. We are also bringing forward one statutory rule, No 96, that amends the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) Regulations. To try to make it a bit simpler for us and for Members, we will move through the amendments in order of their SR number. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission and especially given the number of regulations

that we are dealing with, I will focus my remarks exclusively on those at the centre of today's debate.

First, SR 71 makes the sixth amendment to the 2021 (No. 2) restrictions regulations. Made on 24 March, it allowed for a number of relaxations and technical amendments to correct the legislation. From 25 March 2021, it allowed professional sporting leagues or competitions to take place where they had already commenced after 18 December 2020. It also amended the next formal review date for the regulations to 15 April 2021, removed the expiry date of the regulations, which had been 31 March 2021, and corrected a technical drafting error on the level of fines and fixed penalty notices for certain offences. We ask Members to note here that there were no policy changes to the level of fines in that correction. From 1 April, the SR allowed up to six people from two households to meet outdoors in a private dwelling and up to 10 people from two households to exercise together outdoors. It extended the list of non-essential retail allowed to operate click-and-collect services to include garden centres and plant nurseries.

SR 91 made amendment No 7 to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations 2021 on 31 March. It came into operation on 1 April and allowed up to 10 people from two households to take part in outdoor sport, including exercise or training, and indoor toilet facilities in sports or exercise facilities to open for those participating in an outdoor sport.

The third SR that we are debating is SR 93 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations. This rule made no policy change to the regulations; it only consolidated the restrictions regulations as they stood on 8 April 2021. This consolidation created a clear and accessible set of regulations that can be more easily amended in the coming weeks and months as further relaxations are agreed by the Executive. This rule also marks the start of the set of new principal regulations and revokes the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations, which were made in July 2020, and all subsequent amendments to them in 2020 and 2021.

Some face-covering provisions previously in the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations were not included in that new consolidation. Instead, SR 96, which is before the Assembly today, amended the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations to include those existing face-coverings provisions in relation to places of worship and close-contact services. This rule was also the first amendment to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations 2021. It was made on 8 April and came into operation on 9 April 2021. It required people to wear a face covering whilst inside a church or other premises where beliefs are practised and where they are providing or receiving a close-contact service.

For eagle-eyed Members, I point out that, while the wording has changed slightly in this piece of legislation, it is a matter of drafting and does not reflect any change of policy. It does, however, now provide operators of a passenger transport service, their employees and their agents with the power to enforce the legislation.

Arís eile: níl athrú ar bith air seo ó thaobh polasaí de.

Again, this is not a policy change. Operators of passenger transport services had already been designated as

relevant persons with identical powers under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations. Those powers are now in the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations instead.

I now move on to the fifth and final statutory rule, SR 97. This is the first amendment to the newly consolidated Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations 2021. Coming into operation from 12 April, it allowed: click-and-collect services for all non-essential retail; the opening of outdoor retail, including car dealerships, car washes, garden centres and plant nurseries; the viewing of venues used for weddings or civil partnerships by up to four visitors, accompanied by one staff member; the removal of the "stay at home" requirement; outdoor sporting events for up to 15 people for the purpose of training, organised by a club, individual or individuals affiliated, in each case, to a relevant sporting body or organisation; the removal of the 25-person limit for attending funerals, marriage and civil partnership ceremonies; and, lastly, up to 10 people from two households to meet outside at a private dwelling.

Molaim an rún agus na rialacha don Tionól. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

**Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health):** First, I note the improvement in the daily reported statistics. We all welcome the fact that a significant number of people are being vaccinated, with the programme now open to 30- to 34-year-olds. The vaccination programme has been a success, and we welcome the impact that the speed of that programme is having on cases. The downward trend in the number of cases identified on a daily basis is welcome, as is the significant reduction in the number of COVID patients in our hospitals, although our thoughts are with those patients with COVID who are in hospital. We wish them a speedy recovery that will see them back home with their families as soon as possible.

The easing of restrictions is welcome, and we hope that the rules that we are discussing today start to bring us along the road to recovery and normality. We all welcome the opportunity to see more of our friends and family in outdoor settings. I am sure that many of us have taken advantage of the opening of hairdressers' and barbers' businesses, although I am sure, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, you see that that does not include me [*Laughter.*] I hope that it soon will.

It is a process, however, and I urge everyone to follow the guidance and regulations rather than push or bend the rules at this important time. It is crucial that we follow the rules and guidance as they are eased, as the process of easements will ultimately allow us to move more quickly to the point at which COVID-19 has less of an impact on our lives. We all look forward to that time.

The easing of restrictions and the reduction in numbers of COVID cases and patients allow the Department of Health to shift its focus to recovery from COVID-19. Over the last year, we have seen our waiting lists grow longer, health inequalities widen and the health and social care workforce stretched to, and indeed beyond, breaking point. The Department must focus on and urgently address those issues over the coming months. The Committee held an informal event with cancer charities and support groups; there is significant concern that late presentations of cancers are resulting in much worse outcomes for patients

and more difficult and expensive treatments for the health service to provide. Following the rules allows our health service to focus on those very important issues.

The Committee was briefed on the regulations on 22 April 2021 and raised some issues with officials on 29 April. There is increasing frustration among members of the Committee about the limited opportunity that the Committee has to consider COVID-related rules. At times, the Committee has the feeling that all it can do is to rubber-stamp the rules, as opposed to scrutinising them and having an input into the process. The Committee has raised the issue on a number of occasions in the Chamber and with the Department. We understand the tight time frames that are involved. However, the role of the Committee is to scrutinise legislation, and the current process leaves the Committee unable to effectively undertake that role. That was highlighted last week by the significant confusion about guidance issued for the hospitality sector, which resulted in the Committee urgently writing to Ministers to seek clarification of the guidance. I ask Ministers, as restrictions continue to ease over the coming weeks and months, to consult Committees at an early stage through a return to the SL1 proposal stage that would allow that scrutiny and input to take place.

The briefing that we had from the director of population health on the regulations gave members the opportunity to discuss the regulations in more detail, and a number of issues were raised. Members raised the issue of the change in messaging from “stay at home” to “stay local”. There were concerns about the definition of “stay local” and about how that would be enforced by the PSNI. That issue was raised again by the Committee at its meeting on 29 April. There were concerns that there was still no definition of “stay local”. We would appreciate Ministers’ clarification of that today.

There was also a discussion of the wearing of face coverings indoors. The Department advised that that was being considered as decisions were being made to open indoor venues. The Committee further discussed the information that accompanied the regulations and concluded that some thought could and should be given to including public health reasons for the decisions that are made. That would provide the public with understanding of and evidence on why particular decisions are made and a level of confidence in those decisions.

The Committee awaits information on the fines related to the regulations.

The Committee looks forward to receiving from the Department that clarification on the level of fines associated with these regs.

#### 11.45 am

As I mentioned, the Committee also raised concerns with officials in relation to the guidance and regulations for hospitality and the seemingly confusing information and enforcement of those regulations. The Committee agreed to write urgently to the Health Minister and the Executive Office to underline its concerns in relation to the issues that had been raised by the sector and the difficulties that it was facing in reopening its businesses. We got a response from the Minister of Health late on Friday evening outlining the definitions currently used and saying that the Department of Health would be content to consider

alternative definitions of “outdoors”. I would appreciate it if the Ministers could outline any ongoing work in that area.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Gildernew:** Yes.

**Mr Allister:** Has the Committee been able to establish to its satisfaction how one determines whether it is the Executive Office that is giving guidance and making decisions or the Department of Health? The regulations seem to emanate officially from the Department of Health, but their interpretation often seems to lie with the Executive Office, which, not for the first time, does not seem to know whether it is coming or going on these regulations.

**Mr Gildernew:** I thank the Member for his intervention. It is our understanding that these regulations reside primarily within the Department of Health and that the drafting and evidence is provided to the Executive by that Department.

I will now make some remarks as Sinn Féin spokesperson for health. Yesterday’s data from the Department of Health reveals that we are indeed moving in a better direction in our battle with the COVID-19 virus. The bank holiday weekend saw communities all over the North reopening. One could not help but feel happy to see some semblance of normality, with people returning to socialising with family and friends and, indeed, our hard-pressed businesses starting to see some trade. We recognise that this has been a hugely challenging time for communities and business right across the island.

While we all deserve the sense of relief that the relaxation of restrictions brings, we must continue to take these steps cautiously. While encouraging a safe reopening of our businesses, it is also important to remind ourselves of the public health messaging around hand hygiene, social distancing and mask wearing, which are crucial measures and which I appeal to everyone to continue to maintain as best they can in the time ahead. It is vital that all public health messaging is clear and well communicated in all settings, particularly as we reopen more venues over the coming weeks. The “stay local” message, for example, needs to be clarified. When we ask people to stay local, are we asking them to stay within village, town or county boundaries, or are we permitting inter-county travel across the island? We need to be clear with these and all other regulations.

Our efforts across the island must be intensified. As the relaxation of travel begins and as we progress into the summer months, when people will want to move around more freely, it is vital that the relevant Departments in Belfast and Dublin coordinate their efforts to ensure that all data is shared as necessary. Our efforts on travel locator forms, the movements of those who travel and quarantine measures must be in sync if we are to contain the virus at its current levels and, indeed, continue to drive down levels of transmission right across our island to protect lives, health and well-being and to allow our hard-pressed health workers the respite that they have so richly earned via their efforts on behalf of us all.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am mindful of the fact that, including Mrs Cameron, whom I will call next, I have four Members on my list. However, there are considerably more than four Members in the Chamber. If you wish to participate in the debate, Members, I ask you to rise so that I can add you to the list.

**Mrs Cameron:** I start by praising those who continue to achieve remarkable success with the progress and roll-out of the vaccination programme. Many friends and constituents have relayed to me directly just how impressive the programme is, whether in community pharmacy or centres such as the SSE Arena or Seven Towers leisure centre in Ballymena, in my case. I thank everyone involved in this life-saving work. Let us remember that that is what the vaccine does: it saves lives, prevents serious illness and reduces transmission. I also argue that it encourages good mental health support. I urge all those in the younger age groups to think of others and to take the vaccine when it is offered to them.

Huge thanks must go to the staff and volunteers who are involved in the entire process. We will never forget the entirety of our healthcare and care home staff, who have given so much to others throughout the pandemic.

Time has moved forward substantially since the regulations were enacted, and we have seen much progress on our pathway out of lockdown to restoring the personal and economic freedoms that we all want returned to society as soon as possible. I ask the junior Ministers to update us on any potential relaxations on the common travel area if they are able to do so.

The SRs reflect the two initial sets of relaxations from COVID restrictions, which took effect on 1 April and 12 April. They relate to the reopening of outdoor retail, extension of click-and-collect services to all non-essential retail, greater flexibility on gatherings in gardens and allowing those who are planning a wedding to visit venues.

We are fully supportive of those rule changes, and, in that vein, I am delighted that that direction of travel has been supplemented by the Executive's agreement on further changes to regulations. We need to reopen our economy as much as possible, and, in doing so, we need to engage constructively and in a timely fashion with those in business in order to ensure that, on this journey, communication is clear. There needs to be a clear public health message, and the end goal has to be clear.

It is a matter of deep regret, frustration and even anger for some that businesses that have longed to reopen are now in limbo because of rigid rules on outdoor hospitality, for example. That is entirely unavoidable, but it needs a quick solution that shows understanding and support, not penalty and punishment. Those are not competing interests, they are mutual interests.

We need to do more to make progress on a couple of issues that I want to comment on today on behalf of constituents. One is visitation of loved ones in care homes and in hospitals, and, in particular, those for whom visitation will aid recovery from serious illness, such as stroke. With the vaccine roll-out in those settings being so successful, we must open up close-contact visitation to other family members as soon as possible. Care home residents and their loved ones have sacrificed so much in this pandemic, and we need to restore their rights.

Secondly, we need home visitation to be looked at once more. We need housebound family members or those who are single or are outside bubbles to be allowed the comfort of others in their homes once again.

One word that keeps cropping up is "loneliness". The company of others is vital in tackling loneliness, and I hope

that we can see progress on that soon, as intimated by the First Minister.

We are in a much better place than many of us probably expected us to be, and while we seek to preserve much-valued liberty, let us also continue to do our bit in continuing to behave responsibly by following the basic precautions on hands, face and space in order to ensure that there is no going back but just going forward.

**Ms Hunter:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate in my role as my party's health spokesperson. Many of the regulations today have now been superseded by more recent announcements and regulations, but the amendment on wearing face coverings seems to be a particularly sensible precaution to take, especially as people can now return to their place of worship and attend services such as weddings and funerals subject, of course, to a risk assessment.

Thankfully, the number of daily infections continues to fall and the vaccine programme continues at a pace with its successful roll-out. All that has allowed for the loosening of restrictions by the Executive in the last two weeks and continued loosening in the weeks ahead. The reopening of society and a return to a much more normal way of life has come as a huge relief after months of lockdown and what was a very difficult winter for so many of us. The changes to restrictions would not have been possible without society as a whole pulling and working together.

We owe a massive debt of gratitude to our NHS and our front-line workers. We will be forever grateful to them for their work under the most trying of circumstances throughout the pandemic in what has been an exceptionally tumultuous year. I also pay tribute to the public for sticking with and continuing to adhere to the restrictions. It has not been easy, but we are seeing every day how their sacrifices continue to pay off.

None of us wants to see or experience again further restrictions or a return to lockdown. It would be all too easy, as things begin to look more positive, for us to ease up in adhering to the guidelines and for complacency to set in. That, of course, would be a huge mistake, and I continue to urge members of the public to adhere to restrictions, which include maintaining social distancing, washing hands and, of course, wearing a face covering.

Having spoken with constituents, I call on the Executive to ensure clear messaging to the public, particularly on travel and making trips to seaside resorts. Additional clarity from the Ministers on holidays this summer would be welcome.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. She knows that that point is something that I have raised consistently at the Committee, particularly on the message to stay local. The Committee has not had any indication or clarity from officials as to what that message means. As we go towards the summer months and people begin to get some release from their cabin fever and start to go about their business, it is crucial that they know exactly what they can and cannot do.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree wholeheartedly and share his frustration. Being from a constituency that has such a beautiful coastline and attracts a lot of tourists, I think that the messaging could definitely be a lot stronger and clarification is needed. As the Chair of the Committee said, it is not clear what "stay

local” means. Does it mean x number of miles? We do not know. As the summer and the beautiful weather come closer to us, additional clarification is badly needed.

I have spoken to constituents who have shared their concerns and said that they really do not understand the messaging. Perhaps further money being put into a media campaign or more online communication are needed as younger people especially really do not know the rules. Guidance is also essential on what is seen as being essential travel within the common travel area. Additional clarity on that is much-needed.

Another main concern that I have is about birthing partner policies in hospitals. Expectant mothers have expressed to me their deep frustration and severe anxiety at not being able to have their partner with them at such an emotional and life-changing moment, especially for first-time mums and young mums. I could have visited Primark last weekend or got my nails done, yet we have expectant mothers who are waiting on wards and are vulnerable and alone and making decisions without their partner being there. That is a really important point. With the continuing loosening of restrictions, now is the time for change in the policy to allow for birthing partners at all stages of the birthing process — before, throughout and after — so that it is not decided on a case-by-case basis and is not for up to one hour a week post-birth.

**Mr Buckley:** I appreciate the Member’s giving way; she is touching on points that are close to my heart and the hearts of my constituents. Does she agree that it is equally unacceptable for trusts to adopt different approaches in their communication on birthing partners, which is what we have seen to date? If we are going to get clarity on the matter, it must apply across Northern Ireland.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree: there is a lot of confusion because the response is often, “We do what we can on a case-by-case basis”, but we have expectant mothers asking, “What will that mean for me?”. With birth, unexpected things can happen, so it is really important, especially in circumstances where there has been a traumatic birth, that they have their partner there for that additional support.

As I have done previously, I want to mention the impact of the pandemic and successive lockdowns on our collective well-being and mental health. I am thinking particularly of the elderly, the vulnerable and those who have had to shield, especially those who are living in rural areas like my constituency, and have been greatly impacted by the isolation over the past number of months. We have not yet seen the full impact of the pandemic on people’s mental health or the ramifications for our health service. I continue to urge the Executive and the Minister of Health to work to ensure that the correct and sufficient services are in place to deal with that.

As of last Friday, many businesses have thankfully reopened, at least to some extent, and will continue to do so in the coming weeks. That is very welcome and great to see. I know from business owners in my constituency of East Derry that the Executive’s support schemes were a lifesaver and allowed businesses to meet necessary costs and outgoings throughout different phases of the lockdown. However, I urge the Executive to not let up on support for businesses. It is still very early days in the road to recovery, and, sadly, many businesses will have found

themselves in a position where it is no longer sustainable for them to have their doors open at all.

I thank the Health Minister and his Department for all that they have done over the past year and continue to do, in what is a tumultuous time in our history.

#### 12.00 noon

**Ms Bradshaw:** It is with some reluctance that I support the regulations such a long time after they came into effect; indeed, some have, in effect, been superseded by later regulations that we have not yet debated in the Chamber. I hope that you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, will allow me some brief leeway to touch on those later changes towards the end of my contribution.

I repeat my and my party’s great discomfort about the need for the regulations to be in place at all. We are a liberal party. We want to move as quickly as possible to a position where people can access public services freely, engage in socialising and leisure activities as they see fit and run businesses without significant barriers. We should not underestimate the severe impact of denying or delaying access to vital services, notably in health; of restricting people from doing things to help their physical or mental well-being; and of limiting people’s ability to earn a living and engage in their passions. Nevertheless, as responsible representatives and legislators, we accept that the balance falls in favour of restrictions in the interests of overall public health. We need to be sure at every step, however, that restrictions are justified and consistent and that they can be easily understood and complied with.

Amendment Nos 6 and 7 to the (No. 2) regulations have already been largely overridden in practice, but amendment No 6, in particular, continues to contain a degree of precision and complexity that mystifies many members of the public. They contain permission for 10 people from two households to meet outdoors for exercise and for six people from two households to meet in a private garden. Subsequently, we appear to have broadened the latter but not the former. There are, no doubt, graphs and charts that explain how that, in theory, is supposed to reduce the risk of inter-house spread, but it is hard to understand why it is 10 people specifically for exercise but no other purpose, with a further requirement that it be in public, but six — now 15 — people for any purpose as long as it is in private. In fact, at one stage, we permitted golf four-balls from a maximum of two households: that is just not how it works. Those constant layers of complexity may sound good in theory, but they make the public give up trying to understand them in practice, with an inevitable impact on compliance. Is outdoor activity low-risk or not? In other words, while it is understood that a range of considerations goes into deciding on the restrictions and that the process is complex, there is no doubt that the outcome should not be. If we expect compliance, we need to ensure that the outcome is clear, coherent and consistent.

I am still a little mystified as to why the face covering regulations are not written more straightforwardly. I have received assurances that they are being considered again. The requirement should simply be for them to be worn in any indoor public space or when visiting a home to provide a service, with specific allowance for practical requirements such as eating in a restaurant.

The revocation of the (No. 2) regulations is a helpful tidying-up of the overall regulations, although I still wonder whether we are giving enough attention to the why rather than just the what. The tidying-up means that it is clearer what the regulations state, which is a good thing. However, as I raised at the Health Committee, I wonder whether there should be some commentary, perhaps in an explanatory memorandum, that goes beyond generalisations about public health considerations and explains exactly why the regulations are in place. While I respect that public health risk is not the only consideration, I remain of the view that public compliance would be higher if there were a more direct link between restrictions and clarity on the scientific evidence for them.

I turn to what is now best read as amendment No 1 of the 2021 regulations. That, too, has largely been overridden by the opening of gyms, retail and outdoor dining. Are we clear that the regulations are being applied clearly, coherently and consistently? The issues that have affected the hospitality sector in Belfast have been raised today. In the past week, some premises found that arrangements identical to those made and permitted under identical regulations last summer were suddenly no longer permitted. Either implementation was wrong in the summer or it is wrong now, but neither looks good. The costs of such a mess, not just financial, are huge to a sector that is already struggling and to customers who were looking forward to the restoration of social contact. It is long past time that the Executive Office guidance focused clearly on being attentive to the direct needs of people who are trying to make ends meet, to resume their passions and to meet up with friends after a long, dark winter. The ongoing confusion is immensely frustrating and could so easily have been resolved through a focus on greater clarity. We have a long way to go before we remove the emergency legislation altogether, so there is still time for lessons to be learned.

**Mr Robinson:** Now that we see some easing of restrictions, which is very welcome, when do the Ministers anticipate that even a limited number of spectators, provided they abide by the health regulations — wearing face masks etc — can attend Irish League matches and other sporting occasions?

I highly commend all health workers who have done such a tremendous job to keep us safe from this deadly virus. Again, I appeal to all in society to still adhere to government guidelines to keep every one of us safe.

**Mr Sheehan:** It is has been a difficult and challenging year or 15 months for everybody but for some more so than others. We know that many people have died, others have contracted the virus, and people have lost their jobs and their livelihoods. Hopefully, with the vaccination programme, we are moving out of the emergency that we have been in for so long. People are definitely tired and frustrated with the lockdown, and they want things to be eased up. There is no doubt about that. However, "caution" has to be the watchword as we move forward, and we need look no further than what is happening in India at the moment.

First, I should make the point that we are dealing with a global pandemic. The pandemic affects not just here, be it the island of Ireland, Northern Ireland or wherever you want to talk about, but the whole world. If the virus cannot be eliminated across the globe, all of us will always be

in danger, and we have seen that over recent days in India. The difficulty in all this is that, when there are more infections, it is more likely that there will be more mutations and, when there are more mutations, there will be more infections. It is a circular problem and a vicious cycle, and we have to be wary of that at all times. I do not want to rain on anybody's parade, and I am as happy as everyone else that the vaccination programme is going well and that restrictions can be eased to some extent.

I want to move on to something a bit more light-hearted. Like Cara Hunter, I had intended to get the nails done on Friday, but, unfortunately, a friend who was retiring phoned and asked me to go for a few pints with him instead, so I had to go and hold his hand. While we were in the pub — well, not in the pub; outside it — where everything was well organised, I ended up at a table beside some young lads who were all enjoying themselves and were out for a bit of craic and a few beers, but, as it turned out, there were seven at the table when there should have been only six. One of the young waiters came over and asked one of them to leave, and, for a while, there was a bit of a Mexican stand-off. That illustrated to me the mindset: once we start to ease restrictions, people feel that it is safe to go about their normal activities as they did prior to the pandemic.

The wearing of face masks was one of the restrictions mentioned. Junior Minister Kearney outlined clearly all the issues that we are dealing with here today, and one of them is wearing face coverings, particularly in churches. Junior Minister Lyons will know that he and I have been toing and froing during some of the debates about the wearing of face masks, but the evidence is now absolutely compelling that the wearing of a face covering helps prevent transmission of the virus. It is clear now that the vast majority of infections take place as a result of aerosols coming from people sneezing, coughing, talking, singing and so on. If you imagine someone smoking a cigarette and exhaling the smoke, that allows you to understand the way in which the droplets are emitted from a person's mouth or nose. The wearing of face coverings is absolutely important in ensuring that we continue to reduce the transmission of the virus.

Given the situation in India and similar problems that other countries may face, we need to be careful and vigilant about the potential importation of the virus.

I will finish on another issue. Contact tracing will also be vital in the time ahead. Over the past year or so, I have been very critical about the contact-tracing operation that has been in place here. I felt that it was very amateurish at times. Since I have moved off the Health Committee, I am no longer sure what the state of play with it is, but I certainly had some serious confrontations with the chief executive of the Public Health Agency (PHA) about the operation that it was running and its deficiencies. In the time ahead, as we continue to ease restrictions further, it is vital that the contact-tracing operation can find those who are infected and those who have come into contact with them. In that way, we can prevent the onward transmission of the virus.

That is all that I have to say today. I support the regulations.

**Ms Anderson:** I support the regulations. In reflecting on the past year, I will say that, when we stood here at

the beginning of the pandemic, we were talking about hundreds of people having lost their lives. As I stand here today, it is coming close to 3.5 million people who have died globally. The enormity of that is somewhat overpowering. When we look at the images on our screens of what is happening in India and elsewhere, we know that that number will only increase as time rolls on.

As we, thankfully, experience an easing of our restrictions, there are a couple of issues that some Members have raised that I will speak about in the context of my constituency of Foyle. Karen Mullan and I have been inundated with questions from businesses that want some clarity about what will happen after 24 May. Thankfully, they know that they will be supported up until that time, but, as has been mentioned, they need more support even as they come out of the restrictions. There are some businesses that I would like to give a shout-out to, because they as yet do not understand what has happened. There are some small wholesalers that may have got support from some other grant relief, such as the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS), but have not had rate relief, because of hereditament. Apparently, that is the categorisation of a business where, if you sell it to another business as opposed to selling it to the public, you are classed as being different. There are a number of businesses, including a few in my constituency, that are small wholesalers with a net asset value of £15,000. They are not getting rate relief, nor are they getting Land and Property Services (LPS) support. They are adversely affected and are struggling. I would like the Ministers to look at that when they are looking into support for businesses.

We know about long COVID.

All of us have constituents who struggle with long COVID.

### 12.15 pm

I would like the Chair of the Health Committee, as well as Ministers, to take that up. In my constituency, trying to get an OT service assessment is close to impossible. An 88-year-old constituent of mine finds it very difficult to use stairs. She cannot physically do so. Yet she has been put on a waiting list of 18 months. She will be 90 by the time she gets an assessment. On top of that, a number of my constituents need OT support because long COVID has impacted on their mobility. We need to look at the lack of OT and GP services. A number of doctors have been involved in COVID-19 duties throughout the pandemic, but, given where we are, some of my constituents still find it difficult to get access to a GP.

I raise these issues only in the context of the easing of restrictions. There is a perception that we are playing catch-up. We are discussing regulations that have already come into place, but that is how things have been progressing.

Another section of people that I would like the Ministers to address is student nurses and domiciliary care workers in the private sector. There is still confusion as to whether they will receive all the £500 appreciation. We all know that domiciliary care workers and student nurses, like others in the health service, are the salt of the earth, and we need to give them clarity.

Finally, in relation to the point made by Pat Sheehan on test, trace and isolate, we said at the beginning of this

process that it was necessary to get that right. I do not think that we did. As we ease the restrictions, it will be crucial to look at that programme to make sure that we get it right.

Go raibh míle maith agat. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute.

**Mr Allister:** I start by reflecting on what others have said, in paying tribute to the vaccinators in our land. We can all marvel at the efficiency and assiduous attention that has got us to where we are. We also recall, of course, that it is because we are in the United Kingdom that we are so far advanced.

When one sees first-hand how the operation is performed, as I did at the Seven Towers leisure centre in Ballymena, one cannot fail to be impressed, not least with the volunteers. We must remember that many of those who usher people in and out, keep people in the right line, show them where to sit and all that, are volunteers. Their contribution, as well as that of the professional vaccinators from our medical services, is truly remarkable. Therefore, I join in paying tribute to them.

I also want to raise some concerns about the pace at which we are going in this matter. My constituents constantly raise with me why, if we are up to speed with vaccinations and our infection rate is on a par with that of other parts of the United Kingdom, do we lag so far behind in the opening-up process. Why are we always some weeks behind what is happening in GB? I heard talk from the Prime Minister — I think it was today — about how the one-metre rule might go by the end of June. We heard talk about opening up flights and all those things. Yet in Northern Ireland, we seem to be forever last in the process. Why is that? Is it our dysfunctional system of government? Is it that we have a Government that like to remind us that they have the power over how we live our lives? Is it because the unspoken message is that we are being held back by our neighbour the Republic of Ireland, which is so far behind in vaccinations? Indeed, when the junior Minister comes to reply, may I ask him what contingencies are in place to deal with the possibility of infections spreading from the substantially less-vaccinated Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland? What steps do the Executive propose to take to protect the people of Northern Ireland, which should be one of their primary considerations if things are out of kilter and if the Republic continues to lag behind in vaccinations and the extent of the infection rate? Those are key considerations.

Another factor of great agitation has come to light over the past few days, and it relates to outdoor hospitality. As I sat here today, I read correspondence from a constituent in North Antrim who runs a much-sought-after and much-used hostelry on the north coast. Yesterday, that person was served with a prohibition notice from the environmental health officer from the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council — the same council that turned a blind eye to overcrowding in a certain hostelry in Portrush during the Open golf tournament a couple of years ago but which is coming down incredibly hard on an operator elsewhere on the north coast. The council is saying that, because the area at the back of the premises does not have 50% of the roof removed, even though it has most of its side walls removed, and because it does not, therefore, comply, it is serving a prohibition notice on that operator. That is the sort of thing that was never mentioned in July,



when the whole premises, inside and out, could be in use. Yet now, suddenly, it is a prohibition. Why is that?

I read in the prohibition notice that the regulations that are relied on are, in fact, the Smoke-free (Premises, Vehicle Operators and Penalty Notices) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007. So, here we have a situation where a business that has struggled to get back open and spent lots of money, like others, in equipping itself according to the standards that are set in the summer to be open again outside, suddenly finds that it is being visited with retribution under the smoke-free regulations of 2007. Where is the fairness? Where is the logic? Where is the need for any of that?

I say to the Executive that they really need to get a grip. We have had enough petulance when it comes to the hospitality industry. The Executive need to get a grip, and, in particular, they need to embrace common sense when it comes to many of those issues. Otherwise, businesses that have just about kept themselves above water, when they think that relief is coming, are slapped down and may well sink without trace. Is that what the Executive want? I hope not, but that is what some of those actions, such as in respect of that small business, are going to deliver.

The other remarks that I wanted to make echo something that Mrs Cameron said when she talked about the punitive restrictions on visiting in care homes and, indeed, in hospitals. Just last week, an elderly lady was in touch with me. Her husband is in the cancer unit of the City Hospital, and his prospects are very poor. He may well not come out of hospital. The family had to nominate one visitor, and, because the lady in question is impeded in her mobility, visiting is a big problem for her, and they nominated the eldest son of the household. Now they are in a situation where that poor lady may never see her husband alive again, and that is cruel. There is no other word for it: it is cruel. Therefore, I echo the comments that the relevant Department needs to address that issue. A bit of discretion would go a long way.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. I wholeheartedly agree with the Member's point, and the points that have been echoed by my colleague Pam Cameron. The lack of visitations in the care home and residential settings has been a cruel aspect of COVID. However, from speaking to the sector, I know there is alarm about the lack of support in place to help adjust so that visitations can be provided in the very difficult circumstances. Insurance is a particular problem, and insurers are now holding care and residential homes to ransom rather than allow safe and compliant visitations. Will the Member agree that it is important that the Department of Health and Executive colleagues work with that sector to ensure that barriers can be overcome?

**Mr Allister:** I do absolutely agree. Many sectors have suffered immensely. We tend to look at the care home sector from the perception of the families and those in the care homes, but I have no doubt that care home operators, likewise, have difficulties. However, I say to the Executive that the regulations need to be tempered with a modicum of discretion and common sense to allow visitation. We need clarity moving forward, and we need to move forward, not stagnate.

**Mr Carroll:** Last weekend, I received my first dose of vaccine at the SSE Arena. I thank all those health workers

who administered it to me and the many hundreds of thousands of people who have received one or two doses of the vaccine. It was a surreal but remarkable event and experience, to be frank. It struck me that our health service and vaccination programme has a global workforce, and it would not be able to function without the many international and migrant workers that keep it running. Obviously, everyone rises and thanks our NHS workers — and I have just done that, and I do it throughout these debates — but what is thanks when there is no official recognition or remuneration for the work of those important and essential workers? At last week's Health Committee, we found out that no new money has been set aside to give a pay increase to healthcare workers in our communities. Health workers risk their lives, and the least the Executive can do is to meet their union's demands for a just pay settlement. As things stand, it does not look like that will take place, and that is a severe failure for those workers.

Last week was a fiasco for hospitality. Some organisations that did not throw their staff under the bus were told that they could not open, despite being able to open last year. Other organisations could open seemingly without any bother, despite throwing their workers under the bus by disgracefully withholding pay or, in some cases, sacking them. We need to recognise that what happened last week was a fiasco and does not need to be repeated.

#### 12.30 pm

As other Members said, we need clarity about what staying local means. People can travel to caravans and similar set-ups and environments. Can they do that for leisure? Is it within the current regulations, or what is the situation with that? As Pat Sheehan and others said, we need caution. There is a very worrying scenario not only in India, where there is a rise in cases and new variants, but in Chile, which lifted restrictions too quickly and where cases and deaths rocketed and spiralled. Everybody, including me, wants restrictions to be lifted as quickly and as soon as possible. However, it is better to be too cautious and wrong than to be reckless and move too quickly. I ask the junior Minister to answer this in his response: what is the modelling for predicted cases? Chris Whitty said that there will be an inevitable rise in cases in England, so, presumably, a bit of work is being done with hospitality and retail in order to talk about the expected rise in cases here.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** No other Member has indicated that they wish to speak in the debate. Therefore, I call the junior Minister Mr Gordon Lyons to respond to Members' contributions.

**Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** I welcome today's debates on the amendments covering SRs 71, 91, 93 and 97, which are amending the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations, and SR/96, which is amending the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) Regulations. I thank Members for their contributions. Although I will not comment on Members' points, I am happy to address some of the individual questions that were raised.

First, I want to address the issue of concern that Mr Gildernew raised, which does not seem to be an issue that concerns only him. I recognise the contributions that were made across the House on the position on outdoor hospitality. That has been of great concern, and I say to businesses that I certainly recognise the lengths they have

gone to and the investment that they have made to try to reopen safely. There has been a lot of concern about and care taken on that, and proprietors want to make sure that they can reopen their business. Many of them want to stay within the rules and thought that they were doing so. We have been informed that there has been no change to the definition of indoor and outdoor areas that applied last year. Mr Allister rightly said that the definition of “enclosed” and “substantially enclosed” comes from the smoke-free premises legislation of 2007 and is directly referenced in the regulations. That is the same definition that was in place last July, which states that outdoor premises should not be more than 50% enclosed. Obviously, there is an issue because people looked at what they did last year and thought that they could do the same because no one had told them otherwise. That is absolutely an issue of messaging.

As I said before, many people want to stick to the rules and do things the right way. Mr Allister gave an example of a very heavy-handed approach where people came straight in with a prohibition notice. I am sure that that was not a deliberate breach of the rules by the business but a lack of understanding of what they actually meant. I have taken that on board, and, if possible, the Executive should be flexible about that in the future. That will require the amending of those regulations, and it is something that we should look at. However, I would really like to see indoor and outdoor dining open again as soon as possible. That is what we should all want to see.

**Mr Catney:** I thank the junior Minister for giving way. I was fortunate that I was able to go for a pint on Friday. I went to a bar called Bob Stewart’s, which borders just south of my constituency of Lagan Valley. The bar did things very well, and they were very well-handled. There were queues and one-way systems in place. I then took a turn up to a local golf club and found how it had organised it. A one-way system was in place. I then had to go out to visit a bar in Lisburn called The Highway Inn. Its owners spent £70,000 on setting up a little pod. That was done within the regulations, but they fell foul of the law. There are discrepancies.

Does the Minister agree that those bar owners tried their best to work within the law and that there is a little ambiguity, regardless of where you are, when you look at that seating in a pod? It is an outdoor space that is cleaned every time that it is used. It was one person in, one person out, and it can be rented out for only two hours at a time.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** With the greatest respect to the Member from Lagan Valley, three pubs in one day sounds like some sort of a crawl. I am sure that it was not.

**Mr Catney:** May I come back on that one, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker? *[Laughter.]* Believe me: one was an official visit; the other two — all right. I make no apologies: I had waited a long time to have those drinks, and I enjoyed them. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Lyons:** Before you interjected, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I was going to say that it seemed as if the Member was on a pub crawl on Friday. Indeed, we heard from quite a few Members around the Chamber that they spent Friday visiting pubs. I am not sure what time that was, but, just for the record, I can confirm that I was doing constituency business on Friday.

I am glad to hear —.

**Mr Catney:** It was before the rugby.

**Mr Lyons:** Maybe visiting pubs is constituency business for the Member. It is good to see people getting back out again. We require that understanding and recognition that people are trying to do their best and to keep within the rules. The Executive and environmental health officers should make it as easy as possible and be trying to help people. We should remember that those businesses have been under huge pressure over the last 12 months, and we should help them.

Consistency is also important. That comes up time and again, and I will address it when I come to Cara Hunter’s remarks. People get exceptionally frustrated when they see different approaches being applied in different places. I take on board the Member’s comments on that.

The other issue that Mr Gildernew raised was the “Stay local” message. I completely agree with him that there is a need for greater clarity on that, and the Executive are looking at it. During January, when we were in a very restrictive lockdown, most people will have understood that to mean very much staying within the areas where they live. However, as we opened up caravan parks and people can now play sports in different places, it is harder for us to be clear on that. The Executive recognise that, and I know that other Members recognised that as well.

I want to pick up on some of the points made by Pam Cameron. We fully recognise the issue of mental health and loneliness, in particular. We hear about that time and again, and I am very keen that there is movement on indoor settings. People, especially some of the older people in our society, want to have that contact. They are maybe not able to go or do not go to pubs, bars or restaurants, but they want to have a friend in their home. We need to look at that in a very sympathetic way.

We also need to consider the common travel area and travel within it, an issue that Pam Cameron raised. I have been contacted by an awful lot of people who want to see their children or grandchildren who live in England, Scotland or elsewhere. There is much more freedom in the rest of the UK compared with Northern Ireland. If you come back to Northern Ireland, you must isolate etc. It was mentioned many times that we are entering a period in which the case numbers are very low in comparison with what they were just a few months ago. We need to allow people to travel a little more freely and to enjoy a family life, which, of course, is a fundamental human right.

**Mr Gildernew:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Lyons:** Yes.

**Mr Gildernew:** Will the Minister acknowledge that, even in recent weeks, we continue to see hospital services here under tremendous pressure? At times during recent weeks, capacity has been over 100%. We need to ensure that we are cautious in how we abide by and adhere to all the regulations to take as much pressure as possible off the hospital services and to retain that, in order to allow the hard-pressed staff to get a rest.

**Mr Lyons:** We always need to show caution in everything that we do when we are considering the regulations. We need to ensure that we do not throw caution to the wind. We are still promoting the message of maintaining social distancing where we can and engaging in all the habits that should be common to us by now. However, that cannot

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stop us moving forward and recognising the many different issues that are facing us, be they in our economy or in mental health. They need to be taken into consideration.

I want to pick up on an issue that Cara Hunter raised. I completely agree with her about the restrictions on hospital visits and, as Mr Buckley raised, care home visits. These restrictions have not been imposed as a result of regulations; they are the policy of the Department of Health. I support what she said. Mr Allister raised the same issue and gave a very sad example of people who are not able to visit their loved ones in hospital. A constituent who contacted me this week told me about his pregnant wife. She has two young children but will have to stay in hospital for some time because of the details around her pregnancy, and she is not able to see her young children because of the visiting rules. When we consider that her family members can go to a hairdresser, or wherever else, but cannot visit their mother in hospital, we need to look at that. These are young children. It is important that we show flexibility around visiting and recognise the severe impacts that the restrictions are having on people. I thank her for raising that issue. I also agree with her comments on business support.

Paula Bradshaw is no longer in her place. I agree with what George Robinson said about spectators at sporting events. That can be done in a managed and safe way. I think of Larne Football Club and the processes that it had in place. People were brought into and left the ground in a very orderly manner. There was plenty of social distancing — almost entirely outside. That needs to be considered, and Minister Hargey will bring forward proposals on that area.

Martina Anderson made a number of points about health services in general, including long COVID, access to GPs and student nurses. They are issues of policy for the Minister of Health, but I will ensure that they are passed to him. It is important that those are considered. We understand the concerns around them.

Mr Allister raised a number of issues. I join him and other Members in paying tribute to those who have been vaccinating and who have done such a fantastic job. Their work has allowed us to get to the point at which we are today, and that has to be recognised. Of course, being part of the United Kingdom has allowed us to advance to this stage. I also suggest that not being part of the European Union has helped us, but that is possibly not a view that is shared across the House. It is good to see the vaccination take off, and, in particular, we recognise the volunteers who have given up their time.

Mr Allister raised the issue of why we “lag so far behind” the rest of the UK in the relaxation of regulations. I want to make sure that we can open up everything as safely and quickly as possible. In fact, there is a duty on us to do that. As soon as these restrictions are not required, they should be lifted. He also asked about protecting Northern Ireland from areas such as the Republic of Ireland where there is a higher rate of infection. At this time, the strong public health advice is that there should be a 10-day period of self-isolation when one returns from certain countries, including the Republic of Ireland. All these issues will need to be kept under review. As many mentioned, if there are particular hotspots in certain countries, or in countries in general, prudence and caution will be required when considering those and determining whether further restrictions are necessary.

I hope that I have answered the Member's questions on outdoor hospitality. Again, I strongly agree with the need for consistency among environmental health officers as well.

**12.45 pm**

I think that I have answered most of Mr Carroll's questions on travel and the “Stay local” message. I do not have details here on future modelling. The Chief Medical Officer and, in particular, the Chief Scientific Adviser provide that. I will ask my Department whether any future modelling can be provided to the Health Committee if the Committee wants to request that.

Over the past 12 months, we and the Minister of Health have had many debates of this nature. I am glad that we are heading in the right direction. It is great to see our town and city centres opening again. I noticed that last week, when I could not get a parking space outside my constituency office. Unfortunately, it had been very easy to do that over the last number of months. In one way, I am glad that that is not the case because it shows that we are opening up again and that the economy is coming to life.

We want to make sure that that continues because real people are being impacted in their businesses, jobs and livelihoods. We need to do everything in our power to support them. It is fantastic that the grant schemes have been in place and all the rest of it, but people do not want handouts. They want to run their businesses, so we need to make sure that we can open up. We have willing partners who want to make sure that we can open safely, so let us make sure that we work with them, recognising that COVID is still with us and that we need those measures and mitigations. Let us make sure that we follow the public health advice so that we can continue down that road of getting things opened up again, which we all want to see.

I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

## The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The motion has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

## The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The motion has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

## The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The motion has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

## The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The motion has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Members, as it is 12.50 pm, and the Business Committee is due to meet at 1.00 pm, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.50 pm.*

*On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —*

2.00 pm

# Oral Answers to Questions

## The Executive Office

**Mr Speaker:** Questions 7 and 10 have been withdrawn.

### Goods Checks: Veterinary Arrangements

1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether any discussions that they have had with the UK Government on the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland have included veterinary arrangements in relation to goods checks. (AQO 1962/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister):** While we have differing views on the decision to leave the EU and on the protocol, we are committed to working together to achieve the best possible outcome for local businesses and will continue to do so. As an Executive, we regularly review the impacts arising from the end of the transition period and continue to raise concerns with the Westminster Government and the EU on many issues, including those relating to sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks.

Any decision on veterinary arrangements for goods checks is the responsibility of the British Government. In seeking the best possible outcomes for our citizens and for traders, however, we have continued to highlight to Whitehall and the EU the impact that those issues are having on our businesses. We have been clear that any solutions to them need to reflect the practical impacts and should be developed in liaison with our business community, which has continued to stress that solutions need to be simple, practical and affordable.

**Mr O'Toole:** Before I ask a supplementary question, I acknowledge that this is the first time that we have been in the Chamber since the First Minister announced her decision to depart. While she and I do not agree on very much, perhaps we agree on experiencing a degree of frustration at times with the Democratic Unionist Party, but I will leave it at that. I wish her and her family all the best as we move on.

Deputy First Minister, we know that there are difficulties with our post-Brexit trading arrangements. I am glad that you agree that a veterinary arrangement would be good for smoothing those issues, but we also need to focus on the positive benefits that our unique market access can bring us. What are you and the Executive Office more broadly doing to reassure investors, given that, this week, a major multinational investor told the 'Financial Times' that the company had looked at the opportunities coming from the protocol but the current scenes in Northern Ireland mean that it thinks that it might be "uninvestable" in? That is not good enough. What is the Executive Office doing not just to reassure investors —

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member get to the question, please?

**Mr O'Toole:** — but to get them here?

**Mrs O'Neill:** First, I say to the Member that it is the responsibility of all of us in political leadership to work to

make politics work for everybody. Politics has to deliver for everybody. None of us wants to see a reoccurrence of the scenes that we have seen on our streets over recent weeks, and we all need to go out of our way to make sure that that does not happen. We certainly do not want that to be a factor that determines the outcome of people's decisions on whether to invest here and to create employment opportunities and all the prosperity that comes with that.

As part of moving forward and our recovery, particularly the economic recovery, the Department for the Economy has published a plan, while the Executive are working on the new Programme for Government, the economic recovery package and the post-COVID response. That combination of things means that we need to look at what opportunities are presented to us. There are opportunities afforded to us and markets open to us; you have referred to that on a number of occasions. We need to make those opportunities work to our advantage in the time ahead, and I will work with all Executive Ministers to make sure that that is the case.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I also wish Mrs Foster and her family all the best for the future.

As Mr O'Toole pointed out, there are both opportunities and challenges for businesses as a result of the protocol. Does the Minister agree that the alternative of a no-deal Brexit would have been devastating not only to the economy here but to the economies across these islands?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, of course. We have said that from day one. The Member noted that we have been afforded special status through the protocol that facilitates our unique and continued access to the EU single market. That gives us the opportunity to be the gateway for the sale of goods to two of the world's largest markets. Local businesses and manufacturers, as well as our farmers and traders, want to see the protocol implemented so that they can avail themselves of the protections that it affords them and the special status that it affords the North. We are now the only place where businesses can operate free from customs declarations, certificates of origin and non-tariff barriers on the sale of goods to both Britain and the EU.

Going forward, we need to build on that and on the strength that the all-island economy gives us for attracting jobs and investment.

The British Government must now get on with implementing the protocol in full, and any delays to the full implementation of the protocol, which is our protection against the worst excesses of the hard Brexit, clearly risk any future stability, growth and prosperity. Even the Member who spoke previously referred to that. You are right to say that the prospect of a no-deal Brexit would have been deeply damaging and destructive and, probably even more so, very disruptive not only to our economy but to our peace process.

**Dr Aiken:** I, too, wish the First Minister all the best in the future and all the rest of it. We might have had our differences, but we wish you all the best for the future.

The question is clear. The Ulster Unionist Party has put together several practical suggestions on how to deal with SPS and trading issues. Will the deputy First Minister and the First Minister commit to bringing all parties together to discuss the Ulster Unionist Party proposals, including with

Maroš Šefčovič and the EU? Rather than talking over our heads, will they actually deal with the people of Northern Ireland, where these issues matter most?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I remind the Member that the Executive meet every week and that all Executive parties discuss the issues, try to work our way through them, make the case for what is in the best interests of the business community here and try to find resolutions to the issues that we need to find resolutions to. I welcome the fact that there has been some progress across a raft of issues. However, there is more to be done. I welcome the fact that there is a commitment from the co-chairs of the Joint Committee and the Specialised Committee and that all that work to find resolutions to the issues continues. Hopefully, in the weeks ahead, we will see some progress on that.

As I said in my original answer, it is important for our business community that we have certainty and stability and that people can plan for the future knowing exactly what is coming down the tracks. It is clear that the protocol is not up for renegotiation. There are new post-Brexit realities that we have to work our way through, and, whilst there has been progress to date, there is still a way to go. Let us continue to work together to find the resolutions that we all want to find and that are in the best interests of the economy here.

**Mr Blair:** On behalf of Alliance colleagues, I wish the First Minister all the very best for the future. I first met the First Minister when she was doing her duty in my constituency of South Antrim and I was a local councillor. I saw her dedication to duty on that occasion and have seen it since, and we thank her for that.

I go back to the original question about discussions and work on veterinary arrangements in relation to goods checks. Will the deputy First Minister give an update on the work of the joint specialist working group?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The First Minister and I attended a meeting of the Joint Committee on 24 February at which I welcomed the commitment from the co-chairs to the proper implementation of the protocol and their focus on finding solutions that are acceptable to all. As well as highlighting that the Joint Committee is a forum for constructive discussion on the issues and is the mechanism that was agreed to iron things out, I made the case that the business community here wants stability, certainty and simplification, where it can be achieved. The First Minister outlined the impact of the protocol and told the EU that a solution to the challenges that we face should be fit for purpose and not imposed, but both teams — British Government and EU — agreed to continue to engage on technical discussions and come back to the Joint Committee. I look forward to that work happening and to being invited back for a further discussion on where we have got to, but there are positive noises about some issues perhaps being resolved.

## Paramilitary Activity

2. **Mr Stewart** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their Department's work in tackling paramilitary activity. (AQO 1963/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, junior Minister Kearney will answer question 2.

**Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):**

The first phase of the cross-Executive action plan on tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime ended on 31 March 2021, and the Executive Office has lead responsibility for delivering actions B1 to B4 of that plan. Actions B1 to B3 relate to the reintegration of those with conflict-related convictions who have identified obstacles to employment, financial services and travel, among other things. Good progress has been made, including adoption of the employers' guidance on 'Recruiting People with Conflict-related Convictions' by the Civil Service. Work continues to improve access to financial services and international travel. Action B4 is known as the Communities in Transition project, and phase 1 has seen contracts awarded for delivery of over 30 individual projects and two regional programmes across eight areas of focus. A mid-term evaluation of implementation so far has been completed that shows that a significant amount of good work has emerged through the project to date.

The Executive have agreed to a further phase of the wider tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime programme, to be delivered until March 2024. The Communities in Transition project will be a significant part of the community-facing element of the programme in phase 2.

It should also be noted that the Communities in Transition project is only one of many interventions that are being funded as part of the tackling paramilitarism programme, which includes policing responses and focused youth interventions amongst other things. A lasting impact, however, will be achieved only when all parts of the programme operate in partnership.

**Mr Stewart:** I take the opportunity to thank the First Minister for her many years of dedicated public service and wish her and her family well for the next steps.

I thank the junior Minister for his answer. Does he agree that there is not and has never been any justification for the existence of paramilitary terrorist activity? Given the recent attacks, particularly on off-duty police officers, especially in my constituency of East Antrim, does he agree that the security forces should be given all the power that they require to take those organisations off our streets? Will he also assure the public that the policy of paying off paramilitaries will cease forthwith?

**Mr Kearney:** I thank the Member for his question. I dispute the point about paying off paramilitaries to make them go out of existence. That is not a correct characterisation of the work of the programme. However, I absolutely agree with the Member's condemnation of the attack on the police officer and his family in Larne, in his constituency. I also associate myself with condemnation of the attack on the police officer and her family in Dungiven just previous to that. There is no room, scope or role for paramilitary or organised crime gangs in this society. They are the antithesis of what we need to see in developing a united, shared community. We, as an Executive, must bend our collective efforts to ensuring that the programme is effective in and of itself and delivers the desired results but also that, through political leadership across all five parties that are members of our Executive, we speak with one voice — beimid ag caint d'aon ghuth — in our absolute and unequivocal opposition to any further violence against police officers or any other public servants in our society.

**Ms Flynn:** To follow Mr Stewart's point, over the past number of weeks we have seen the destructive influence that paramilitaries can have on our society in working-class, loyalist communities and the murderous intent of the so-called dissident micro-groups. Does the Minister agree that those gangs need to be condemned outright and removed urgently from our society and that those who refuse to abandon that criminal activity must face the full consequences of our criminal justice system?

**Mr Kearney:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a ceiste. It complements the question posed by the previous Member. I absolutely agree that, 23 years after the Good Friday Agreement, there can be no place in this society for paramilitary groups, criminality, organised crime groups or narco gangs. They neither care for nor offer any type of future. The manipulation of young people that we see and the destructive violence that is used, which has very serious potential implications for life and safety in our society, must all be removed. Like sectarianism and all forms of bigotry and intolerance, those elements are a cancer in our society.

I have a clear message, and I echo what I said in response to Mr Stewart: those involved in violence, criminal damage, manipulation of our young people and attacks on the PSNI must now stop. There should be no ambiguity whatever on that issue. They must be brought before the courts, made amenable and held to account, because they are enemies of our peace process. Making politics is key to building a future free from paramilitarism, criminality, organised crime and the influence of those narco gangs. We are at a point, and there is a choice to make between a race to the bottom or a peaceful, democratic, political way forward and safer communities.

That will be found through the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and, as I said earlier, all of our parties on the Executive working together in concert and in lockstep.

**2.15 pm**

**Mr Stalford:** Mention was made of making politics work. What message does it send when a party in the Executive names constituency offices after those who have engaged in terrorist, criminal acts or when elected representatives of that party hail and eulogise those who engaged in terrorist, criminal acts, including, most recently, a Member of the European Parliament?

**Mr Kearney:** I thank the Member for his question. Listen carefully to what I said: we need to speak with one consistent, united voice in our opposition to all forms of violence, terror, paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime in our society. Having listened to the Member speak on many occasions, I am sure that we are at one in that ambition and responsibility. Sinn Féin will not be found wanting in our responsibility, along with Executive colleagues, for taking that agenda forward and ensuring that the anti-paramilitarism programme, which we have responsibility for seeing delivered, is effectively delivered and becomes a foundation stone for a stable, functioning society with good politics at its heart and proper power-sharing.

**Mr Allister:** Never mind the hyperbole: how does the Minister reconcile the proclaimed dedication to tackling paramilitarism with the continuing glorification of terrorism,

as highlighted by Mr Stalford? We all know that a Sinn Féin MP still has the name of his office glorifying two individuals, McNulty and Magorrian, who lived and died as terrorists. As long as there is glorification of terrorism, it will be nothing but cant and hypocrisy to talk about tackling paramilitarism.

**Mr Kearney:** I thank the Member for his question. I will not take lectures from him or his ilk on these matters. My credentials in relation to standing up against paramilitarism, organised crime, criminality, sectarianism and intolerance in this society are beyond dispute. I assure the House that I will continue to provide that type of leadership when others in the House — perhaps as I look towards the Member in question — fail in their responsibility to provide unambiguous leadership for the future *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I am sure there will be another opportunity to say it, but I offer my best wishes to the First Minister and hope that she will look forward to spending time with her family, some of whom will not have known her outside of political life. Having that family time together will be precious to her and to them.

With regard to the Communities in Transition funding, the junior Minister referred to the next round of funding allocation and the review. What will be the objectives for the next round of funding? Will we see a greater integration and opportunity for others, outside of those who have already successfully received some of that funding? Will some of that money be skewed towards better outcomes in tackling poverty and low educational outcomes?

**Mr Kearney:** Go raibh maith agat as ucht an cheist sin a chur. I thank the Member for her question. I think the Member knows well that the issues that we face are integrated and that poverty is an integral part of this society. Poverty breeds disenchantment and alienation, and that creates the circumstances where paramilitary organisations and criminal gangs can seek to manipulate young people. We need a holistic approach. I believe that, thus far in phase 1, we have seen that type of integrated approach taken forward. When we are responsible for the allocation of public moneys, it is essential that, at all stages, we ensure that the funding is targeted where it is most required, on the basis of objective need, and that we get value for money. The indications of the evaluation to date are that that has been the case in relation to phase 1 of Communities in Transition.

We are moving into a pre-market consultation. There will then be a new round of public procurement for organisations to participate in under phase 2. All the appropriate rules and regulations on good governance and public procurement will apply at that stage.

### COVID-19 Task Force: Business and Hospitality

3. **Mr Buckley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the actions taken by the COVID-19 task force to facilitate the reopening of business and hospitality. (AQO 1964/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Executive's COVID task force is leading and coordinating an integrated programme of work for response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

On 15 April, the Executive made a wide range of decisions on reopening many aspects of our economy and society over the coming weeks. In line with those decisions, the task force has been at the forefront of coordinating engagement with key sectors through meetings with key representatives of the hospitality and retail sectors. The task force adds value to the recovery process by providing advice on key messages and mitigations in order to help increase adherence to the public health regulations and guidance.

The adherence work stream of the task force has facilitated the provision of specialist behavioural insights advice on the pathway out of restrictions and on supporting sectors to ensure that they reopen in a safe and well-managed way. In addition to the work of the task force, the Executive have agreed to extend financial assistance to sectors that are still restricted or partially restricted under the COVID regulations. That includes extending until 23 May the provision of the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) to hospitality and gym businesses, payments to businesses that are under COVID restrictions, the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS) and the large hospitality and tourism business support schemes for those businesses that remain eligible.

**Mr Buckley:** While I welcome the opening of our society, particularly the business and hospitality sectors, the Minister will know that there was quite a bit of ambiguity about the rules and regulations surrounding that reopening. With that in mind, what consultation has there been with the Executive task force and councils in order to ensure that there is continuity of approach in how they and the hospitality sector in particular deal with those difficult circumstances in the immediate weeks ahead?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I concur that there has not necessarily been a good and joined-up approach across council areas. We have seen different approaches in different areas. The junior Ministers are trying to coordinate that work to bring the council leads together. Last week, we saw in different areas businesses getting ready to open up that did not have the chance to do so or that had to amend what they had done. A lot of those businesses met huge financial costs to try to get their premises ready to open. It is important that there is not a blade of grass of difference between approaches as we work with the hospitality sector and the whole business community to get them into a state of readiness for opening.

Last week was a good news story. We have got to a great place on the COVID response. We are winning the battle against COVID, and, with the public's continued support, we will continue in that positive vein. However, there seems to have been some disparity of approach, and we will try to rectify that. The First Minister agrees with me that we want the strongest possible communication with the task force and the hospitality sector to make sure that issues that need to be resolved can be resolved.

**Mr Catney:** I, too, take the chance to offer our First Minister time to reflect as she spends time in Fermanagh, that most beautiful of counties. No doubt she will have that. I wish her all the best.

The deputy First Minister outlined the actions taken by the COVID-19 task force to facilitate the reopening of businesses and hospitality. How will those actions help?

What is the task force doing to keep those businesses afloat and open?

**Mrs O'Neill:** As the Member knows, from 30 April, we agreed that unlicensed premises could reopen on an outdoors-only basis, with a maximum of six people from two households, and licensed premises, including social clubs, could reopen, again on an outdoors-only basis, with a limit of people from no more than two households. The curfews on takeaways and off-licences have gone. We have the indicative date of 24 May for when we hope to allow unlicensed and licensed premises to reopen indoors, with mitigations in place. We hope that that is welcome news for the hospitality sector. The priority for the coming weeks must be, as I have said previously, to engage with the sector to make sure that it has all the support that we, as an Executive, the task force and local government, can possibly offer.

It is in everybody's interest. We want to have the industry up and running again. We want to see people back in their place of employment. We want to see people out enjoying themselves, having a meal and getting out and about again. We want this to be sustainable and to continue in our positive vein, but it will only be through continued communication that we will be able to do that.

**Mr Sheehan:** Enormous progress has been made in tackling the virus. Would the Minister agree with me that, as we move to further easing of restrictions, care and caution need to be the watchwords, especially when we take account of what is happening in India and even the news here that a number of people who have already been vaccinated have ended up in ICU with COVID-19?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for his question. He is absolutely right. COVID has no respect for timetables or dates. There is no doubt that this has been one of the toughest times for people, families, businesses, workers and all in our community. When we look at examples from across the world of how the pandemic is behaving, we see that we have to continue to be careful and cautious. We have to make steady progress and to keep going in the one direction, but the restrictions that we have had in place have been necessary at a point in time to suppress the virus and to continue to save lives and to protect our health service. We can continue to move forward and to make sure that we do not go backwards only when we have maximised the mitigations that are in place.

We want to continue to be positive and to give people that hopeful message, but it is important to say that we face risks from variants of concern. We are not out of the woods yet. We face risks from people getting together and perhaps being too relaxed. We need to encourage people to continue to take all the possible steps that we can as individuals to protect ourselves and others and to be mindful of the continued public health message around washing our hands, wearing our face coverings and limiting our social contacts and that, when we are out and about, fresh air and ventilation are part of our protection. Let us not be complacent and we can continue to make progress.

**Mr Dickson:** I add my words to those of others in relation to the First Minister. I wish her well in the future.

Minister, looking forward from where we are in relation to recovery from COVID-19, you have a task force, the Minister for the Economy has a high street task force and

the Minister for Infrastructure has responsibility around planning. Can you tell us what joined-up actions you will be taking in all those areas to reimagine our public spaces, particularly in the delivery of business on the high street?

**Mrs O'Neill:** All those pieces of work have to interact with each other. None of those things can be done in a stand-alone way. An economic recovery package has to take into account the actions that the Economy Department has identified. As the Member rightly identified, we also have the high street task force, which, after a slower start than we would perhaps have wanted, I am glad to say is now off at a good pace. These things have to talk to each other and to complement each other. There is no doubt that the implications of the pandemic for our society and our economy have been immense. As I have said on many occasions in the Chamber, some sections of the economy have been hit worse than others: the hospitality sector is one, and tourism is completely on its knees. We have a huge amount of work to do to rebuild, and that will take us working collectively. We see it very much as the economic recovery package, the Programme for Government and all these things coming together and, as an Executive, planning our way out of this.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mark Durkan. Unfortunately, there will be no time for a supplementary.

## Communities in Transition: Funding

4. **Mr Durkan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the reported £10 million for the Communities in Transition project is additional money or an existing funding allocation. (AQO 1965/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask Minister Kearney to answer this question.

**Mr Kearney:** I thank the Member for his question. After some very disappointing and erroneous reporting about the Communities in Transition project, I welcome this timely opportunity to remind Members and the public what this important project aims to achieve.

Communities in Transition is about helping communities to break free from the grip of paramilitarism. It is designed and delivered to empower and support those in communities that have been negatively affected by paramilitarism, criminality and ongoing coercive control to bring about positive change. In stark contrast to one unhelpful and grossly inaccurate media report, it is not designed to assist paramilitary and criminal organisations to become community organisations. Any such suggestion is an insult to those working to support communities on the ground.

### 2.30 pm

Funding for the Communities in Transition project, which is part of the Executive's tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime programme, was due to end in March 2021. During the first phase of delivery, from November 2019 to March 2021, the project had a budget of £8.5 million, which has had a significant impact in communities, from helping to establish community safety fora to re-imaging murals.

In July 2020, the Executive committed, subject to budget availability and match-funding support, to extending the programme for a further three years to March 2024. The



match funding was confirmed in February, and, as a result, the Communities in Transition project is set to receive an additional contribution of £10 million over three years to support delivery of the next phase of the project, from April 2021 to March 2024. Although this sum falls short of the initial bid of £12 million, which was made to support delivery, it is a positive development that the project —

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister's two minutes are up.

**Mr Kearney:** — has much more surety on multi-year funding, rather than being part of an annual cycle.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions. Trevor Lunn is not in his place.

## Social Distancing

T2. **Mr McCrossan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after adding his voice to those of other Members in wishing the First Minister well for the future on whatever path she takes, albeit there are things on which they have not agreed, she has always put the interests of her constituency first and has done her best to serve those whom she represents, whether, given that the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, this week revealed that he believes that social distancing could end by 21 June, a similar approach is anticipated for here and to state whether the Executive have had discussions in relation to that. (AQT 1252/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for his question. That has not been discussed. I noted Boris Johnson's commentary. However, at this point, the Health Minister has not brought such a proposal to the Executive for discussion. I am sure that we will have to have that discussion in due course.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the joint First Minister for her answer. What is her assessment of what Boris Johnson said, given that there are still serious concerns about infection increasing in our community? Also, as Mr Sheehan pointed out, some of those who have received vaccinations are still testing positive and ending up in ICU. Was what Boris Johnson said premature and unhelpful?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I have not always agreed with Boris Johnson's approach to the COVID crisis. We make our decisions on the basis of advice from our public health team, and, at this time, there is no advice to suggest that this is an area in which we should make a change. Ultimately, that is where we want to get to, but it has to be done in a safe and steady way. It has to be done in a way that does not walk us into a corner from which we will have to reverse. We want to make sure that we make steady progress. Risks are still out there, and there are new variants. We need to be very careful. Let us continue to make progress and build on the positivity of where we are with the vaccination programme.

From an economic point of view, we understand that, in order to make hospitality businesses, for example, sustainable and profitable, they need to be able to get back to the numbers that they had prior to COVID. We want to get them there, too, but it will take a bit of time. We need to continue to make progress and take a steady-as-you-go approach over the next number of months.

## Travel: Isolation Period

T3. **Mr Frew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, considering the impact on people who have been stranded from close family members for so long, how it can be justified that we are the only part of the United Kingdom with an isolation period in place after people travel around the country. (AQT 1253/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Again, that is the public health advice. The Executive have had this discussion on a number of occasions, and we continue to keep the matter under review. In fact, we had that discussion last week, particularly around the common travel area. People can now, for example, travel from Scotland to here but not vice versa. Some families have been distanced for over a year now, and we want to remedy that as soon as we can.

Health has been asked to keep us advised and to keep coming back to it, and we have decided that that is what we will do. I expect that we will have further discussion on the common travel area at this week's Executive meeting and probably next week as well.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Given that hospitality has paid a high price to protect people's health and will need interventions well past reopening, does the Minister support Hospitality Ulster's modest request to establish a ministerial cross-departmental working group to oversee its recovery? If so, what will that look like?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Member was probably not in the Chamber when we spoke about that issue earlier. I made the point that there needs to be strong communication between the hospitality sector, the Executive task force and all our Departments that have a remit in some way or another for hospitality. We need to make it as viable as we can in order for it to open up. We want to be able to keep hospitality open, which is why we need to be careful and sustainable. Communication is the way in which to do that. Unfortunately, over the past week and a half, we have seen a disparity in approach across council areas. We are trying to get that ironed out; that is really important. The First Minister and I have raised the issue of the need to engage with the hospitality sector in a more meaningful way if we are to help people to be successful in opening up during these challenging times.

## Misogyny and Sexism in Public Life

T4. **Mr McGuigan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the joint First Minister agrees that misogyny and sexism in public life, such as that referred to last week by the First Minister and highlighted by the disgraceful and disgusting comments directed at the joint First Minister by a DUP councillor from Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, are totally unacceptable and are a real deterrent to women in public life. (AQT 1254/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thanks to the Member for raising that issue. Although the comments to which you refer were directed at me, I acknowledge that the First Minister also recently referred to the misogyny with which she has had to contend as DUP leader. I think that, on many occasions, we have both talked about what you face when in a position of leadership, particularly in misogynistic commentary. Many in the Chamber can attest to the hurt that that causes not just to them as individuals but to their

families. As a mother, a daughter, a sister and a partner, I know that the most distressing part is often the hurt that it causes to your family. All of us in political life — all political parties must take this on board — have to realise that all that abuse impacts on the reluctance of women to engage in public life. It is a hugely important issue; it has the ability to impact on the representativeness of our Administration. It needs to be confronted and, most importantly, condemned at every turn.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the joint First Minister for her answer. I note the comments about not only the hurt to the person to whom the comments are directed but the wider hurt that is caused to the person's family. Does the Minister agree that, although it is wrong for anyone to engage in that kind of sexist and misogynistic abuse, it is entirely reprehensible when it comes from an elected representative, as was the case recently with DUP councillor John Carson?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. As I said, there should be zero tolerance in society of misogyny and any form of intolerance or discrimination. If that is to be achieved, political leaders will have to lead. There is a responsibility on all of us in the Chamber — this is why I welcome the fact that the Member raised the issue — to be very clear that misogyny will not be tolerated in political parties and to speak out against it when we see it in society.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the next questioner, I inform Members that mobile phones are being operated at the moment. They are disrupting the sound system, which affects Hansard.

### NDNA Commitments: Delivery

T5. **Ms Flynn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after sending her very best wishes to the First Minister, to state whether, given that the restoration of the Assembly and the Executive last year was based on commitments made in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA), the joint First Minister agrees that, whatever the outcome of the process to appoint a new First Minister, those commitments need to be honoured. (AQT 1255/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. You are absolutely correct: New Decade, New Approach provided the basis for the restoration of the institutions, so there cannot be any slippage from the commitments that were made in that deal. Citizens need to see delivery. Politics must work for everybody. Commitments that were made must be honoured. That is crucial.

I, as everybody else has done, wish Arlene the very best for her future. I said that publicly last week, but, given that people are commenting today, I again wish her the very best for the future and whatever that brings for her.

I am determined to work closely with the incoming Minister, who should be in no doubt about my determination to ensure the delivery of the outstanding commitments, particularly where citizens' rights are yet to be delivered in respect of language and culture, legacy and women's healthcare.

**Ms Flynn:** Go raibh maith agat. Thank you to the joint First Minister for that response and those assurances. That sounds like a firm and clear commitment to see the full implementation of 'New Decade, New Approach'. Can the

Minister provide an update on what discussions are taking place with the two Governments about their commitments in the agreement?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thanks again. There are clear and binding obligations on the Irish Government and the British Government to deliver on the NDNA deal and previous deals, particularly as we start to emerge from the pandemic and move to being able to deliver on things that perhaps have been delayed. We have to have that commitment, and we need see it every day from Dublin and London to ensure that all aspects of 'New Decade, New Approach' are lived up to.

### Illegal Street Protests

T6. **Ms Dolan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after wishing her constituency colleague the First Minister all the best in the future, whether the joint First Minister agrees that the ongoing illegal street protests are unacceptable and need to be brought to an end. (AQT 1256/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. There is no place for illegality in our society. Many of the protests have been reckless, irresponsible and a clear attempt to raise community tensions rather than air some kind of grievance. Political leaders need to take a stand against that kind of damaging behaviour rather than, as has, unfortunately, been the case with some — not all — political parties, providing justification for it, as opposed to condemning it.

**Ms Dolan:** Given the serious implications of the protests and their potential to turn violent, does the Minister agree that all political leaders should now call for an immediate end to illegal street protests?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. We have seen time and time again that such protests can turn violent, so it is incumbent on all political leaders to send a clear message that those involved in violence, criminal damage, manipulation of our young people and attacks on the PSNI must stop. We all have a responsibility to build peace and make politics work, so I again urge all those in political leadership to join me in calling for an end to all illegal street protests.

**Mr Speaker:** Roy Beggs is not in his place.

### PSNI: Unacceptable Attacks

T8. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that the deputy First Minister referred to recent attacks on the PSNI, whether, in light of the disgraceful attack on a police officer's home in Larne, she will join with him to condemn such attacks and to call for an end to the reckless and unacceptable rhetoric targeting the PSNI from some people in positions of political leadership. (AQT 1258/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for raising that. Of course, all in political leadership have a responsibility to condemn unreservedly that despicable attack on a police officer and his family in the place where they should feel safest: their home. The week before last, there was an attack on a female officer. All those reckless actions remind us all that words and the manner in which they are used have consequences. There can be no place for inflammatory or incendiary language when what is required is progressive and positive leadership in these times.

**Mr McAleer:** Thank you, Minister. Will you join me and, indeed, the House in sending a message of solidarity to the police officer and his family who were the victims of that reprehensible act?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Of course I will. I can only imagine the distress and anxiety caused to that PSNI officer and his family and, as I said, to the female officer who was targeted in recent weeks. It is important that we, across the Chamber, stand in solidarity with the officer and his family and reaffirm our commitment to upholding and protecting the rights of all citizens to live free from threat or intimidation as they go about their job.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Jim Allister. You may not have time for a supplementary question.

### Northern Bank Robbery

T9. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that “truth and justice” is a phrase that the deputy First Minister has recourse to from time to time, whether, in light of last night’s BBC programme, she acknowledges that the Northern Bank robbery was indeed the work of the IRA as the truth. (AQT 1259/17-22)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I did not watch last night’s programme.

**Mr Allister:** Whether she watched it or not, does she accept that it is the truth that the IRA robbed the Northern Bank? Can she, as a leader of the republican movement, tell us where the money is?

2.45 pm

**Mrs O'Neill:** Funnily enough, that was not discussed at the Executive meeting.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up. Can I ask Members to take their ease for a moment, please?

## Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

### Point of Entry Facilities

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the completion date of point of entry facilities as part of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQO 1975/17-22)

5. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his strategy to restore unfettered movement of goods from Great Britain. (AQO 1979/17-22)

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will group questions 1 and 5.

Under the terms of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020, which embodies the Northern Ireland protocol, Northern Ireland is required to align with the European Union’s sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) rules, an agreement made by the UK and the EU that was not supported by any unionist party in Northern Ireland and runs contrary to the Belfast Agreement of 1998.

I am opposed to the detrimental impact of those additional rules on Northern Ireland businesses and consumers,

specifically the barriers that they place on the movement of animals, goods and products from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. I will therefore continue to engage with ministerial colleagues and the UK Government to press that position. Ultimately, the protocol needs to go. I am firmly of the view that any product that enters Northern Ireland as its end destination should not go under any checks. There are practical solutions for products that enter the EU single market via the Republic of Ireland. There should be no barriers to trade within the UK internal market. Any barriers are wholly unacceptable and go against the requirement of unfettered trade that is underpinned in the Act of Union.

**Mr McGlone:** To date, what compensation has been paid or is likely to be paid by the Department to contractors and those associated with the schemes at the points of entry?

**Mr Poots:** That is not something that I am aware of or have engaged in; I have taken no role in that nor participated in it. As a consequence of the protocol, the estimations now are that, when the grace period ends, there will be 15,000 checks a week. That will have a damaging impact on every nationalist, every unionist and every other person in Northern Ireland, so we would do better not to have any new buildings constructed and not to have any checks on food that will end up on tables in Northern Ireland, having come from Great Britain.

**Mr Allister:** Does the Minister agree or disagree with Peter Robinson that you cannot credibly oppose the protocol while at the same time implementing it?

**Mr Poots:** First, not once have I authorised any infrastructure. This has been imposed by Westminster and has been paid for by Westminster to placate the demands of Dublin and, indeed, the pro-protocol parties — Sinn Féin, the SDLP, Alliance and the Green Party. As a result, every consumer will feel the pain of the protocol. Worse still, not satisfied with the onerous burdens and checks that are being imposed, those parties want more, because they want the rigorous implementation of it. One might expect that from republicans, because they do not mind wreaking damage on the wider community for their own ends, but the Alliance Party is a co-conspirator and cheerleader for things like the ponies being needlessly locked up, pets having medical interventions that are not required, the food in your cupboard costing more, supplies to business being interrupted and parcel deliveries being detrimentally impacted. That is what the Alliance Party and the republicans are delivering, and I want to see it removed.

**Mr Chambers:** What consultations have taken place with the pedigree societies in GB on issues involving the protocol, such as animals with a UK-prefix tag having to be retagged with one that has a Northern Ireland prefix?

**Mr Poots:** Mr Chambers raises a valid point. All of the pedigree societies are being impacted on by the protocol. The integrity of the product that they sell is being impacted on because of the very issue that he raises about UK tags having to be changed. Again, that is unacceptable, and, again, it is something that we are raising, but it demonstrates that we have raised numerous issues with the protocol. The problem is not that there are issues with the protocol; the problem lies at its heart. It is wrong, and it needs to go.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Does he agree that the obvious solution for restoring the unfettered movement of goods from Britain to the North would be for the British Government to align with EU standards and regulations, for example on SPS matters?

**Mr Poots:** That is a possibility, and it is for the British Government to consider it. It is also a possibility that any goods that are being consumed in Northern Ireland and any product that is coming to Northern Ireland and will remain here will have no detrimental impact on the European Union's single market. Mr Coveney, Mr Varadkar and Mr Martin could tell the European Union that that is the case and support us in getting the protocol removed.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the Minister for his answers. Minister, will you outline your plan and timescale for removing the protocol, given that you are likely to end up as First Minister?

**Mr Poots:** I have indicated that I have no desire to hold that position. At every opportunity, I have raised the issue of the damage that the protocol is doing to Northern Ireland both verbally and orally. The UK Government and the European Union are aware of the harm that it causes and the significant further pain that will be inflicted as a consequence of the ending of the grace periods because it is self-evident. They know that the protocol is not fit for purpose. It was a mistake, and it must be replaced.

In January of this year, I instructed my officials to get senior counsel opinion from a top UK constitutional lawyer. On my return to office, an eminent QC was appointed and is scrutinising every aspect of the protocol. On the completion of that work, it is my intention to lodge judicial proceedings against the protocol. I hope that the Department for the Economy and the Department of Health — this is having major implications for medicines and medical devices — will join me in taking an action against the European Union and the UK Government for the damage that they are inflicting on all the people of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** Questions 2 and 4 have been withdrawn.

## TB Eradication Strategy

3. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his plans to consult on a TB eradication strategy for Northern Ireland. (AQO 1977/17-22)

7. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the need to address bovine tuberculosis in cattle. (AQO 1981/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will group questions 3 and 7.

The eradication of bovine TB (bTB) is one of my top priorities. I recognise the devastating emotional and financial impact that a bTB breakdown can have on farming families across Northern Ireland.

A new bTB eradication strategy for Northern Ireland will aim to reduce, and eventually eradicate, bTB by comprehensively addressing all the recognised key factors in the maintenance and spread of the disease. My officials have completed the business case required to support the implementation of a new strategy, and I have now received final advice on a proposed way forward. That will assist me in deciding on the next steps necessary to tackle bTB in

Northern Ireland. It is my intention to launch a consultation on my preferred way forward in the very near future, and I welcome the opportunity that this will provide for stakeholders and the wider public to express their views on how we can best work together to tackle this disease.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister outline when he foresees the consultation being launched, and a way forward agreed, in relation to what is widely known as a costly disease for animal and human health, never mind the cost to the taxpayer?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for the question. Bovine TB cost the Northern Ireland taxpayer some £37 million last year. It has been in and around that ballpark figure for quite a number of years now. I believe that roughly £40 million could be better spent elsewhere than on doing the same thing over and over and not actually dealing with bovine TB.

Work continues apace. The business case for the strategy is complete, and I have received final advice for my consideration. It is my intention to engage with officials, with a view to launching a consultation on the preferred way forward imminently. Once I have considered the responses to that consultation, I will finalise the strategy. I have made it clear that I wish to see the implementation of the new bTB strategy as soon as practicably possible in 2021.

**Mr Middleton:** Does the Minister agree that we need to tackle TB in wildlife and in cattle to deliver a healthier wildlife population?

**Mr Poots:** Absolutely. Wildlife intervention has already happened in England and the Republic of Ireland. I have spent considerable time with veterinary scientists in both jurisdictions, and their advice is very clear: if we are to rid the wildlife population and the bovine population of TB, we have to take action in both. Up to now, we have taken action only in the bovine population, and the logic of continuing to do that, without tackling the issue at the wildlife part, does not exist. The definition of madness is to keep doing the same thing and expect different answers. Some suggest that I do that, but I am afraid I cannot. We really need to get on top of this problem, stop wasting public money and stop putting individuals through immense stress and mental health issues as a consequence of doing nothing about a long-term problem.

**Mr Catney:** Minister, will you publish the final report on the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) wildlife intervention study on badgers and bovine TB? Have you secured the additional funding to replace the £5.1 million lost from the TB eradication programme as a result of Brexit?

**Mr Poots:** Our business plan identifies all those issues. That case will be made to the Department of Finance. If we require additional money, it will be on the basis of invest to save, because, ultimately, we will be driving down the cost of TB. However, there is a course of work to be done. TVR was a useful scheme that gave us a lot of scientific evidence of the links between the wildlife and bovine populations. There are a large number of strains of TB, as we learnt that there are of COVID-19, for example. However, a range of strains exists between the wildlife and bovine populations in particular areas. The linkage is irrefutable, and therefore the evidence base for moving forward is clear.

**Mrs Barton:** Minister, has any progress been made on the biosecurity of cattle ear tags, given that, occasionally,

although the carcass of an animal in a meat factory is found to be infected with bTB, the DNA does not match that of the mother?

**3.00 pm**

**Mr Poots:** It can happen, but it is highly unusual.

**Mr McAleer:** The Minister will be aware of the animal health law that recently came into effect. Has his Department carried out an impact assessment of that law's implications for farmers?

**Mr Poots:** Yes. That is a piece of European Parliament law that was brought forward by the European Commission. We had no role in making that legislation, and we will have no role in amending it. That demonstrates the perversity of the situation that we find ourselves in, in that we are expected to implement legislation where there has been no representation. I join the nationalists of many years ago in saying that that is wrong. We cannot have legislation without representation. That is entirely inappropriate. It has an impact on the farming community, in that farmers will be required to test at their own cost before taking their animals to a livestock mart. That will have a significant impact on those farmers.

### Farmers' Mental Well-being

6. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what is currently being done to support farmers' mental well-being. (AQO 1980/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** The Department's tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme funds the Rural Support charity, the farm families health checks programme and the SPRING social prescribing project, which supports mental well-being in farming communities.

The Rural Support charity operates a telephone helpline and a signposting service for farmers and their families. Its experienced volunteers and mentors also meet and provide continuous support to clients on a range of issues pertaining to farming matters and mental stress. Its ongoing outreach programme is targeted at farmers and farm families in order to help strengthen farm businesses and build personal resilience. The farm families health checks programme also provides support to farmers and has to date screened the physical and mental health and well-being of over 20,000 individuals, primarily farmers, farmworkers and farm family members who have attended marts and community events.

Rural Support and farm families health checks programme staff recently collaborated to create an initiative called Protecting the Asset that is You, which provides key health messages to farmers, farm families and rural communities by using social media platforms.

The SPRING social prescribing project, which is delivered in partnership with eight rural healthy living centres, links medical care to non-clinical locally delivered support services by enabling medical professionals to refer rural patients to social prescribers and, ultimately, to a range of activities and services. Although the Department of Health has lead responsibility for mental health services, we all have a role to play across government. As well as those specific schemes that farmers can access, we are supporting a range of activities to make outdoor recreation more accessible and to encourage greater community

participation and engagement. As we emerge from the challenges of COVID-19, getting people outdoors and active will greatly enhance their mental well-being.

DAERA is developing a new rural policy framework in order to shape future rural priorities. It includes draft goals to reduce loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, minimise the impacts of rural isolation and promote the health and well-being of rural dwellers. The outworkings of that will promote positive health and well-being for farmers and, indeed, the wider rural community.

**Ms P Bradley:** I thank the Minister for that very detailed answer. We know that there are many women in those families who play a very important role in the farming industry. What specific engagement have you had with women who are involved in agriculture?

**Mr Poots:** Our engagement is quite extensive across the board. Rural Support, in particular, provides a lot of support for female members of the rural population. I have to say that, on most farms, women are very often the backbone of the show. Very often, the man is seen out on the front line, but the women tend to do an awful lot of the paperwork, provide an awful lot of the supporting work and keep the show on the road. They face immense pressures as well.

Farming is a difficult business at times. There can be serious problems with cash flow. Weather conditions can cause problems. The subject of TB, which we have just concluded on, is one that causes huge mental stress as people lose substantial parts of their herds. The mental health impact of that is massive. The impact on the gentleman who happens to be leading the farm is perhaps more evident, but it is also there for the lady who may be a bit in the background. We need to ensure that the support is available to every person who needs it in the rural communities. The women in our rural communities are vital to their well-being.

**Mr Butler:** I take the opportunity to wish my Lagan Valley colleague all the best in his leadership competition with the MP for Lagan Valley, Jeffrey Donaldson.

In your role as Agriculture Minister, you are asked every week about mental health, which is good. What are the clinical and non-clinical findings from the roll-out of the well-being and mental health programmes?

**Mr Poots:** We have identified that mental health in rural areas is a considerable problem. We have identified issues such as isolation, loneliness, anxiety and financial hardship, and we are focusing on community development approaches as we seek to roll out preventative activities to address matters identified at a local level. In the December 2020 to March 2021 period, over 75,000 rural dwellers benefited from that initiative. We have other TRPSI-funded initiatives such as the enhancement of forest parks, the development of community trails, the utilisation of school facilities for community use, the regeneration of disused historic buildings in rural communities, the access and inclusion grant-aid scheme to enhance disabled access and usage of public buildings and the continued funding for rural support networks and small-grant schemes to assist the rural community and voluntary sector. Therefore, we take these things seriously.

**Ms Brogan:** On the topic of mental well-being, many anglers and locals in the Dromore and Fintona area of

west Tyrone have been left completely devastated by the major pollution incident at the weekend that resulted in thousands of fish being killed along a 5 km stretch of the Aughlish river. Can the Minister outline what actions his Department is taking to deal with the serious incident?

**Mr Poots:** It is a pretty shocking pollution of that waterway, and I am absolutely appalled that it has happened. My officials are in the area seeking to assist and to mitigate, but, essentially, huge damage has been done, and it will not be rectified for years as a consequence of, almost certainly, someone not doing their job correctly. We will go through the process of identifying the person, taking them to court and ensuring that all costs are attributed to the individual who caused the pollution. However, all of that will not undo the damage that has been done. It deals with the individual responsible, but it will not undo the damage. I encourage everybody who is involved in business, agriculture or anything where there is the potential for materials to get into our waterways to take every action possible to ensure that that is not the case.

**Mr Storey:** The Minister will be aware of another devastating event that took place some 22 years ago in my constituency, with the destruction of the then Lovell and Christmas bacon plant. That was my former employer. It had a huge impact on the mental well-being of the business community and, particularly, the farming community and on the pig industry in my constituency. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the fact that Bann Side Foods submitted a proposal of application notice (PAN) to the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council on Friday, with the potential for 400 jobs and a £75 million investment? Surely, that will be good for the mental health and economic prosperity of the farming community in my constituency.

**Mr Poots:** That is, indeed, a very exciting proposal, and it has been tremendous to see the agri-food sector growing over the past decade and generation. I remember dealing with farmers on the back of the Lovell and Christmas factory fire, and the devastation that it caused. It drove many people out of business at that time. I visited many of those people in those awful circumstances.

Of course, you and your colleagues in that factory also lost your jobs, which was devastating.

It is very exciting news that 400 jobs could be created. It demonstrates that we need to be wise when it comes to the proposed climate change legislation. In Northern Ireland, agri-food is such a large sector that we can make our significant contribution to carbon reduction without annihilating it. Mark my words: taking away 50% of beef and dairy production from Northern Ireland will annihilate the agri-food sector and the rural community. If people are genuine about dealing with mental health and stress, they should think very carefully before putting their hand to something that is causing real stress in the rural community. People need to give a bit more consideration to us all finding a way forward on climate change and carbon reduction.

### Recreational Angling: Lower Bann

8. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his plans to increase recreational angling on the lower Bann. (AQO 1982/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** My Department has an annual programme to maintain and improve infrastructure at angling waters, including the provision of disabled angling stands and improved pathways. Some of these waters are located in the lower Bann catchment, such as those at Movanager, Portna and the Ballymoney river etc. Plans to improve the access road and fishing stands at Movanager canal are being considered. The Department continued to stock game in public angling estate (PAE) waters throughout the COVID pandemic, as well as carrying out maintenance and improvement works at over 90 PAE waters. My officials also work closely with The Honourable The Irish Society, Waterways Ireland and many angling clubs on the lower Bann tributary rivers to improve angling and fisheries habitats in the area.

Finally, my Department's management of salmon stocks and its conservation measures helped to stabilise, and possibly start the recovery of, the numbers of Atlantic salmon returning to the Neagh Bann catchment to spawn. That should help to attract recreational salmon anglers to the lower Bann and increase their number.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Looking to the future, when our tourist trade resumes, does the Minister agree that angling, either river or sea angling, will play an important role in the future of the tourism economy in my constituency of East Londonderry and other constituencies? The Minister has probably answered this already, but will he ensure that every action will be taken to minimise the pollution incident that happened overnight in the Aughlish river in County Tyrone?

**Mr Poots:** The Member is absolutely right: the value of the tourism sector and of angling in that sector is phenomenal. We need to look after it and ensure that those incidents do not take place. Sadly, they do, but we need to do everything in our power to stop them and ensure that individuals recognise their responsibilities in ensuring that they do not happen.

### UK-EU Veterinary Agreement

9. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline what engagement he has had with the UK Government on a veterinary agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union. (AQO 1983/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** Under the terms of the withdrawal agreement, the Northern Ireland protocol and domestic legislation, Northern Ireland must continue to align with the European Union's sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) rules. I am firmly opposed to the detrimental impact of these newly mandated rules on Northern Ireland businesses and consumers, and to the barriers that they place on the intra-UK movement of animals, goods and products from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. As such, I believe that we must get to a position in which we minimise the impact of these checks and then remove them entirely.

Discussions are ongoing between the UK Government and the EU Commission, via the UK-EU Joint Committee, with the aim of finding what I hope will be viable solutions to a range of issues related to the Northern Ireland protocol, including 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 helpful. However,

as it would not address the entirety of the rules associated with the implementation of the protocol, it cannot properly address the issue.

I have engaged and will continue to engage with my ministerial colleagues to explore all available options that could help to remove the protocol and its impact on Northern Ireland-GB trade. Nevertheless, responsibility on the future alignment of the UK within the EU SPS rules and the negotiation of any UK-EU veterinary agreement rests solely with the UK Government.

**3.15 pm**

**Mr Dickson:** Minister, your answer sounds as though you are engaged in doing practical things to deal with the protocol. I congratulate you on that and encourage you to continue down that route rather than trying to oppose the protocol.

**Mr Poots:** The Member welcomes doing things that reduce the impact of the protocol. I also welcome those things. We do things that help, for example, potatoes or other materials to come into Northern Ireland, but many other things are negatively impacted. Ultimately, we need to deal with the underlying problem: the protocol. Northern Ireland does not pose a threat to the European Union single market. Consequently, goods that enter Northern Ireland from Great Britain — all part of the United Kingdom single market — should not be checked because they do not pose a threat to the single market. This is a political decision, taken at the behest of the Irish Government, but it is damaging Irish people living in Northern Ireland. They need to pull back from that decision and ensure that Northern Ireland is treated fairly and equitably within the United Kingdom.

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

### Firefighters' Memorial Day

T1. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether, on Firefighters' Memorial Day, he will join with her to recognise those firefighters who have lost their life in the line of duty, to send solidarity to their families and to express our gratitude to the heroic firefighters, along with members of the Irish Air Corps, for their recent efforts to tackle the devastating wildfire in the Mourne. (AQT 1261/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for her question. What she said is entirely valid and correct. I spent time with the firefighters in the Mourne around 10 days ago. It was a devastating fire, but it was not the first. Our firefighters were out before that, have been out since and are out every year, and that does not get a media profile. The wider public do not see that because the firefighting is more localised. Well done to our firefighters. They are not only out fighting fires on the mountains but rescuing farmers who have got into trouble — for example, with slurry tanks in very dangerous circumstances. They are called out to all sorts of things around farms and in rural communities. With road traffic collisions on our rural roads in particular, the first people who are there are the Fire and Rescue Service, cutting people out of cars, doing spectacular work, saying very little about it and just getting on with their job. It is a very stressful job, and you are

absolutely right that they need all the praise that we can give them.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Minister for his response and concur with his comments. Given the crucial North/South aspect to tackling these fires and the many other cross-border issues relating to agriculture, the environment and our rural communities, will the Minister give his commitment to working cooperatively and collaboratively through the North/South institutions and, in particular, the North/South Ministerial Council on all issues within his remit that affect our communities, North and South, and that impact on an all-island basis?

**Mr Poots:** In my role, I have every desire to work with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland. I do not have an issue with that at all when it is in the mutual interest of both countries. It is in the mutual interests of both countries that people in Northern Ireland do not experience the damage and impacts of the protocol. Therefore, political colleagues in the Republic of Ireland would do well to reflect on that, work with us on that and on other key issues to help Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to prosper. That is what we want.

### Agricultural Wages Board

T2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to his proposal to scrap the Agricultural Wages Board, to explain the reasoning and rationale for that decision and to state the stage that he is at. (AQT 1262/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** For years, we were told, and virtually all parties said, that we needed to reduce quangos. The Agricultural Wages Board is a quango. I have not gone back on my word on reducing quangos. Such a board does not exist in any other sector. We do not have a health wages board, an education wages board or a builders' wages board. The Agricultural Wages Board was there when agriculture wages were very low and we did not have minimum pay, and before a series of conditions on pensions, sick pay, maternity pay and paternity pay, for instance, were put in place. All those things have obviated the need for much of the work that the Agricultural Wages Board did in the past. There is therefore no point in keeping a quango when it is unnecessary.

**Mr Dickson:** Minister, you are echoing the words of the Ulster Farmers' Union and its rationale behind wishing to scrap the Agricultural Wages Board. You have cited a range of types of employment, but all of them have well-developed, collective bargaining and other negotiating arrangements for pay. The agriculture sector is not heavily trade unionised, and many of its people live in rural, diverse and widely spaced out communities. You should therefore reflect on the matter and join the trade union movement in suggesting that we need to retain the Agricultural Wages Board for the reasons that I have outlined. It concerns a group of people for whom there are little or no collective bargaining arrangements in place.

**Mr Poots:** The Member mentions collective bargaining, but what is more important is individual bargaining. The truth is that it is hard to get young people who want to go out in inclement weather and work in physical conditions, and that will continue to be the case as things go forward and there are more challenges in bringing people from other countries into Northern Ireland to carry out work.

The best negotiating position exists when labour is more in demand than the other way around, so people working in the farming community at this time can demand a good source of income, and get it, because, if the farmer needs them, the farmer is going to have to pay for them. It is as simple as that.

### Plastic Reduction Action Plan: Narrow Scope

T3. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why the scope of his plastic reduction action plan is so narrow, in that it applies to government buildings only. (AQT 1263/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** There are some nine different pieces of plastic involved. It is our intention to roll things out considerably further and to increase the plastic bag levy, which we are doing currently. We recognise the damage that plastic does and the fact that much unrequired plastic has been used in the past. We therefore want to screen out single-use plastics from Departments and, indeed, beyond.

**Ms Sheerin:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, as you will be aware, you are required to implement the articles of the EU single-use plastics directive that apply to the North and that are to be transposed in July of this year. The action plan that you have produced does not provide me with a lot of confidence as to your commitment to a reduction in single-use plastic usage. Will you commit to applying those articles as per the time frame? Will you go further and say that, owing to the innovative ideas contained within, you will look at implementing the directives to which you are not required to commit?

**Mr Poots:** You are the first person whom I have heard say that she does not have confidence in my commitment. That has not been expressed anywhere else. That suggests to me that your reason is more political than anything else. What I will say is that I do not need an EU directive to know the difference between right and wrong. I believe that we should be reducing the use of plastic, full stop. I do not need a bureaucrat in Brussels to tell me to do that.

### Lough Neagh

T4. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his Department's obligations to and vision for Lough Neagh, given that he will be well aware of its increased usage during lockdown and its potential for staycation-type holidays. (AQT 1264/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** Lough Neagh is a huge asset and, I believe, an underutilised one. I have said that from my early days of visiting Lough Neagh at Antrim or Oxford Island. I would love to see Lough Neagh more utilised. It is the largest body of fresh water in the United Kingdom.

We have tremendous opportunities from the agri-environment side to reduce pollution in Lough Neagh. It has faced problems with eutrophication in previous years, and that starving of oxygen in the water undermines what we are capable of doing on the Lough Neagh waterways. It is important that we do everything that we can to ensure that Lough Neagh has clean waterways and that the land around it is low in phosphates in particular.

There is much that we can do through my green growth strategy to ensure that we have a better management system for slurry so that a lot less slurry is spread in generations to come. That is my big aim. I want us to move to the anaerobic digestion of slurry materials and separation and then pelletise the phosphates as opposed to land-spreading it. We do our lidar assessments, and we do our checks of nutrients in the soil and ensure that what is applied is applied appropriately. That would be of great assistance to Lough Neagh.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I welcome the Minister's outline. Last week, Minister, you made an announcement about grants for Lough Neagh fishermen: will you confirm that the applications should come from licensed eel and scaled-fish fishermen?

**Mr Poots:** Yes. The applications are out there. The fishermen who fish in Lough Neagh are entitled to do so on the basis of the licence.

### Rural Development Policy: Update

T5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the indicative timing for the publication of the new rural development policy. (AQT 1265/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** That policy has been completed and is with me at the minute, so I imagine that, over the next couple of weeks, we will be ready to move it ahead and get it launched.

**Mr McAleer:** The Minister will be aware that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund was the main means of financing a new rural development policy, given that we have lost EU funding for it. Does the Minister have any update on the status of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the likelihood of its being forthcoming?

**Mr Poots:** I have no recent updates on the Shared Prosperity Fund. Unlike some, I welcome it. It is good that we are getting that investment. I will take support from the UK Government as I took it from the European Union, and we will work with them to maximise that support and dispense it fairly and equitably across rural communities where need is manifested.

### Mourne Mountains: Wildlife Population

T6. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given that he looked on in horror at the devastation caused by the fires in the Mourne Mountains and responded quickly to them, to elaborate on actions that can be taken by his Department and others to help to rebuild the wildlife population in the Mournes. (AQT 1266/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** There needs to be a lot of engagement with the landowners there, including the National Trust, which is a large landowner, and we need to work closely with them. An example of a place that has worked extremely well is Glenwherry Hills, where there has been close engagement with the local farming community. As a result of the work between the farming community and NGOs, we have a lot more wildlife, including species of ground-nesting birds that were under threat. Tremendous work has been done there. Good work has been done in those areas on muirburn, which is strip-burning. Consequently, we do not have the devastating damage that is caused by huge fires.



The other aspect is that, by working well with local farming communities, we can ensure that there is no overgrazing or undergrazing. Both of those lead to circumstances in which gorse gets out of hand, which leads to gorse fires.

**3.30 pm**

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, you will know that there was an intense reaction and, in fact, affection for the members of our fire service who took part in tackling the blaze. Can the Minister elaborate on whether there is any way that the community can get more involved in helping when situations such as this develop on our mountains?

**Mr Poots:** The community response was fantastic. They recognised that the fire personnel were working extremely hard up those mountains. The food did not come just from the Newcastle area. The people of Newcastle were absolutely fantastic, but people sent provisions for the fire personnel down from Belfast and from far beyond the immediate area.

In areas with that quality heathland and those beautiful landscapes, we need to work with communities and NGOs to create opportunities. I have just announced the environmental fund, which is some £2 million. I encourage the NGOs and councils that manage those sensitive areas to get in really good applications, get funding from elsewhere and maximise the support that they get from my Department by getting support from others as well and come forward with really good schemes, so that we can continue to develop, build and enhance our environment.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

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

## Executive Committee Business

### **Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021**

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

*That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. Please open the debate on the motion.

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for facilitating this. I am seeking the Assembly's approval of a statutory rule (SR) that has been made under powers contained in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020. Members will recall that this Westminster Act includes temporary modifications to insolvency legislation that apply in both Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

It is recognised that the restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of coronavirus could seriously impact the finances of companies that previously had been viable and solvent. The temporary modifications are therefore aimed at assisting such companies and protecting them from the threat of winding-up proceedings from their creditors. At the time the Act was made, it was not known how long the crisis would last. As a result, I have sought extensions to a number of these temporary measures over the last months as the impact of the pandemic continues to affect local businesses. The regulations that I am now asking the Assembly to approve extend until 30 June 2021 the periods during which three of the temporary modifications are to apply.

The first temporary modification is an exemption for small suppliers from a requirement to continue supplying goods and services to companies that have entered insolvency proceedings. The Act inserted provision into insolvency legislation to oblige suppliers to continue supplying companies that have entered insolvency proceedings. This requirement to maintain supplies overrides any contractual terms that would allow the contract to be cancelled and is to ensure that companies in financial difficulty continue to have access to the goods and services that they need to continue trading whilst their rescue or sale is being considered. However, it is recognised that the obligation to maintain supplies to companies that have entered insolvency proceedings does present some financial risk to suppliers. The impact of such a risk could be expected to be proportionately greater in the case of small suppliers. Therefore, with the heightened risk of customers becoming insolvent during the pandemic, it was decided to alleviate this risk by temporarily exempting small suppliers from the obligation to maintain supplies to companies that are subject to insolvency proceedings.

The remaining two modifications to be extended are aimed at helping businesses by temporarily removing the threat of

winding-up proceedings where debts are due to the impact of coronavirus. The first of these is the suspension of the right to petition the High Court to have a company wound up on the basis of a statutory demand served during the relevant period. This will give businesses breathing space and an opportunity to reach realistic and fair agreements with all creditors. The final measure prohibits creditors from petitioning for the winding-up of a company unless they reasonably believe that the company's inability to pay its debts is not the result of coronavirus. If they do present a petition, the High Court will not make a winding-up order unless the creditor demonstrates that the pandemic is not the reason why the company cannot pay its debts. The aim of this temporary measure is to allow businesses that are otherwise profitable to continue to trade through the current difficult economic circumstances.

The regulations that I am asking the Assembly to approve were made on 25 March 2021 and must be approved by the Assembly within 40 days of that date. They have been agreed by the Economy Committee, and the Executive were advised prior to this debate. The extensions to the temporary provisions made by the regulations will ensure that our insolvency legislation is kept in step with that which applies in Great Britain. This will ensure that local businesses will benefit from the same easements, for the same periods, as those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

**Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** I rise briefly as Chair of the Economy Committee to support the motion on its behalf. As the Minister indicated, the amendment of certain relevant period regulations will further assist companies affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The regulations extend the duration of the temporary measures restricting the use of statutory demands and winding-up petitions introduced by the Act from the original date of the end of March 2021 until 30 June 2021. The Committee considered and approved the SL1 for the regulations at its meeting on 23 March. Members agreed the SR, subject to the Examiner's report, at the Committee's meeting on 14 April 2021. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion to approve the regulation.

As Sinn Féin economy spokesperson, I note that, similar to previous SRs under the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act, the extension of the date will give businesses some protection from the continued impact of the pandemic. It is sensible that we allow those provisions to be extended. Hopefully, we will continue on the positive trajectory that we are on. I pay tribute to all businesses and workers across the North for their efforts to reopen safely over the past couple of weeks. I have seen it in my constituency — in Coleraine, Portstewart and across Dungiven, where my constituency office is. The care and attention being taken is clear to see. It is recognised that we need to move forward carefully so that we do not end up going backwards again. It is important that we all remind ourselves to follow the public health advice and to support our local businesses. On behalf of Sinn Féin, I support the motion.

**Mr Stalford:** I will speak on behalf of the DUP to support the motion. I thank the Minister for bringing the statutory rule to the House. The rule will extend until 30 June 2021 the period during which some of the temporary modifications to corporate insolvency legislation that were

included in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act will apply. Modifications are:

*“restrictions on the use of statutory demands and winding up petitions and the small supplier exemption from termination clause provisions.”*

Clearly, COVID has had a longer and deeper effect than many originally anticipated. It is right, therefore, that we take account of that in providing breathing space to our businesses. I welcome, therefore, the provisions that the Minister has brought before us. I congratulate her on her ongoing work to help get our economy open and to help people get back to trading and generating wealth, which, ultimately, pays for all the public services that our people enjoy.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I call the Minister to make a winding-up speech.

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Chair of the Committee and my party colleague for their support for the measure. It is important that we allow businesses time and space to try to become profitable and to trade through these very difficult circumstances. Like the two Members who spoke previously, I am pleased at the way in which we have been able to continue to open our economy. I hope that that progress continues so that we can see a much freer and more open economy for the future. It is only then that we will really protect jobs and services.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Members, the House is inquorate. I will not put the Question until we have a quorum.

*Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.*

*House counted, and, there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.*

*Upon 10 Members being present —*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

*Adjourned at 3.45 pm.*

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 10 May 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Executive Committee Business

### The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Mr Speaker:** The first item of business is a motion to affirm a statutory rule.

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** I beg to move

*That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 be affirmed.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed that there will be no time limit on this debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on the motion.

**Mr Murphy:** This annual order is brought about following the Executive's agreement to the 2021-22 Budget, which I outlined to the Assembly in my statement on 27 April.

Today's order sets the two separate regional rate in the pound figures for 2021-22. One applies to households; the other applies to businesses. In setting the rates, the Executive have to consider the impact on business and household finances and the impact on the level of revenue raised for public services.

For the second year in a row, rates are being set in the shadow of COVID-19. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the economy and on the cash flow of businesses. The relatively high level of commercial rates was already a key concern for businesses, many of which are very small and locally managed. That is why, last year, I provided all business ratepayers with an 18% reduction in the non-domestic regional rate. The order keeps that reduction in place for another year.

The capacity of many companies to pay rates has been further undermined by the pandemic. COVID created the prospect risk of widespread business closures and, with that, the loss of jobs. Therefore, last year, I provided the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic with a rates holiday. I have allocated £230 million this year to continue that rates holiday for another year.

These measures will help to sustain businesses and the jobs that they provide. Likewise, the freeze on domestic poundage for the second year in a row will be vital to household ratepayers. We already have relatively low domestic charges, and maintaining that low charge will help household budgets. To give ratepayers a two-month break in payments, I have decided to delay again the issuing of rate bills. That will help many ratepayers whose incomes are still being affected by the pandemic.

Taken together, the domestic and non-domestic regional rates that have been set by today's order account for approximately £690 million to the Executive, before the effect of the rates holiday is taken account. That revenue supplements the Executive's block grant and facilitates more expenditure on our health service and on roads, schools, infrastructure and other essential public services.

The regional rate represents just over half of a typical rates bill, with the other half made up of the district rate that is set independently by councils. In total, the rating system is designed to contribute over £1.3 billion to Executive and council funding. My Department has also introduced measures to allow more time for councils to set their 2021-22 rates and to allow greater local flexibility to councils in rate setting. It is welcome that councils adopted a similar approach to that of the Executive, keeping their district rates as low as possible, given the need to shelter homes and businesses from the economic impact of the pandemic.

I turn now to technical matters. The main purpose of the order is to give effect to the poundage decisions that have already been made during the Executive's Budget process by specifying the regional rate poundage for 2021-22. Article 1 sets out the title of the order and gives the operational date as the day after it is affirmed by the Assembly. Article 2 provides that the order will apply for the 2021-22 rating year through to 31 March 2022. Article 3 specifies 27.9p in the pound as the non-domestic regional poundage that is to be levied on rateable net annual values and 0.4574p in the pound as the domestic regional rate poundage that is to be levied on rateable capital values.

I look forward to hearing Members' comments. I commend the order to the Assembly.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance, Steve Aiken. Let me take this opportunity, given your announcement at the weekend, to wish you and your family the very best in the time ahead.

**Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance):** Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his remarks. I can assure the House that I will not be retiring from politics. Despite my demeanour today, I will fully enjoy continuing to hold Ministers and the system to account.

On that point, Minister, the Committee considered the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021, and we agree and concur that, in order to provide the necessary stimulus for the Northern Ireland economy, it is very important that we maintain the rates holiday and allow

it to happen. Freezing the rates as we have done is also appropriate, because we need to send a strong message across the entirety of Northern Ireland about coming out of COVID and how we will manage that.

On behalf of the Committee, we support the order.

**Mr McHugh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement, which I support. This instrument, which is at his disposal, will in many respects help to stimulate the economy here in the North of Ireland. We all know only too well just how things are for businesses and for householders and how people have suffered over the period of the pandemic. For some, it has been very difficult: I am thinking in particular about furloughed workers who, like self-employed people, have had great difficulty in meeting bills and, maybe, something as basic as putting meat on the table. This rates relief, in many respects, is such a help to them. It will help to stimulate the local economy and will, hopefully, encourage all of us to respond to the Minister's initiative and others that have been taken by the Executive that will come to the fore later in the year, such as the voucher scheme and the Job Start scheme. Those initiatives will complement this decision by the Minister and allow the economy to emerge from the depressive state in which it has found itself. I look forward to all that improving in every respect. Arís eile, gabhaim mo mhíle buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. Again, I thank the Minister for his statement.

**Mr O'Toole:** Before I begin, I offer my best wishes and those of my party to my colleague the Chairperson of the Finance Committee and his family as he proceeds, hopefully, not to a completely quieter life. He will have more time to focus on all the important issues that we are debating in Committee.

The regional rates order for 2021-22, which my party supports, is exactly the same as the one that we approved for last year. I want to make a couple of remarks about it today. Given where we are with our economy as we come out of COVID, it is important for our fiscal position going forward.

As the Minister said, the poundage levels for domestic and non-domestic rates are unchanged because we have chosen to freeze them for a further year. Given the severity of the economic conditions that we have faced, we agree that that is the right policy response. As well as continuing to freeze the rates, the Finance Minister has prolonged a full rates holiday for businesses in the sectors most acutely affected by COVID-19, in particular the hospitality and tourism sector.

The Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, which advises the Minister, has said that revenues have fallen in the past year by more than three quarters. That totally unprecedented collapse in income came about as a result of our imposing draconian restrictions, and that is why, in a sense, the rates holiday that we are enacting today, following on from the one that we have had over the past year, is a completely understandable, justifiable and welcome intervention for dealing with that. We hope that the easing of restrictions continues, allowing our economy to re-emerge.

Even as the economy returns and all economic forecasters predict growth in 2021, we do not know exactly how that recovery will map out across our economy, nor do we know how many jobs will be permanently lost when the

furlough scheme is fully wound up later this year. The most recent data published by the UK Government shows that just under 100,000 workers were on furlough in Northern Ireland at the end of March. Thankfully, that number will have changed a bit since the economy has started to reopen. Even as it reopens, however, we do not know precisely how many jobs will be permanently lost and how many businesses will, sadly, fail, and I am afraid that some will fail. Nor do we yet know the longer-term structural shifts that may be taking place in economic activity not just here but around the world, following the pandemic. We know that fewer office workers will need to be at their desk Monday to Friday from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, but we do not yet know exactly how many fewer people will be there. Critically, we also do not know what the knock-on impact will be on city centres, which currently rely on office footfall to sustain retail and hospitality during the working week. We do not know any of those things, but we know that we will still rely on the regional rate as a significant source of revenue for public services here.

The Minister said that, across the Executive and local government, the total amount of revenue raised from rates is £1.2 billion. From reading the Budget, I know that the rates income this year is forecast to be just under £600 million, but that will be largely offset by the £230 million that is being spent in offering a holiday. Taken together, the non-domestic and domestic regional and district rates are the only major source of revenue that is devolved to these institutions. As I said, this year, the forecast income from the regional rate is just under £600 million, but, in fact, a little over half of that sum will be raised owing to the holiday, with which we agree, being extended by the Finance Minister. However — I say this in a cross-party way as genuinely and sincerely as possible — we will have to face up to the difficult truth that, as we approach fiscal year 2022-23, having forgone about 40% or thereabouts — the Minister can correct me if he thinks that that number is wrong — of our regional rate income for two full years, there must be some level of risk attached to that revenue from 2022 onwards. To be clear, over the past two years that was necessary and essential, and we all agree with it. I am not in any way casting aspersions on the policy, but we have effectively forgone about 40% of the regional rate strand of income, which is one of the very few areas from which the Executive can derive an income. That means that we will have to think hard about what happens next year. This time next year, depending on politics but if things go to plan, we will all, I am afraid, be just a few weeks away from an election when the next regional rates order comes forward. I am not casting aspersions on any of us as politicians, but those will be tough decisions for politicians of all parties to make in the mouth of an election.

That is before you add in the fact that the full impact of the Reval2020 exercise has not yet been experienced by most businesses as a result of the holidays and freezes of the past two years. The broad uncertainty facing all tax systems everywhere in the developed world based on commercial property valuation is because, as of right now, we simply do not know what the medium- and long-term impact of COVID-19 on commercial property values will be. We just do not know how completely COVID will transform how we work, shop and socialise.

**12.15 pm**

All of that is to say in a genuine, sincere, cross-party way that it is urgent that either or both the fiscal council or fiscal commission being set up by the Minister take a long, hard look at the operation of our rates system as they look at our broader fiscal position. As I and my party have said, it needs to be part of a broader look at our economic performance in conjunction with our fiscal challenges. We have had a lot of debate about the fact that a disproportionate amount of the small strand of income that we are able to generate here comes from non-domestic rates. It is really important that, as we look at our fiscal options and at our economy, we make sure that it is not operating, in effect, in an anachronistic way, given the transformation that, we know, we will face in how we work, shop and socialise.

Given the state of our public services, especially the health service, and, as I have said, the highly limited fiscal tools available to us, we simply cannot drift into this time next year without an urgent and fundamental look at our regional rates model. We cannot afford to risk half a billion pounds in regional rates income and, as the Minister said, over a billion pounds from regional and district rates income for public services because we cannot face confronting the difficult challenges.

In supporting today's regional rates order, I simply set it out that we should all be cognisant of the profound issues that we will face as we come out of COVID and deal with unwinding some of the freezes and holidays that we have all, rightly, supported over the past 15 months.

**Mr Catney:** I welcome the fact that there is a zero increase in the regional rate for another year. The economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic may have some light at the end of the tunnel. We have seen footage across the news of long queues for businesses that have been able to reopen. That has to be welcomed, as long as people remain as safe as they can. As a former business owner, I empathise with the feelings of uncertainty, pain and fear that have been felt by most of our business community throughout the pandemic, and it is right that we should do all that we can to support them in this time of need.

I thank the Minister and all the officials who have worked in the Department to achieve a zero rate increase. The Minister and the Department suggested that councils should make the same decision, and I know that some have. Clearer advice, support and direction were needed to help councils to achieve the zero rate rise.

Coming out of the pandemic and out of this unprecedented time of economic turmoil gives us an opportunity to look at how we tax our businesses. Business taxation must be done in a way that supports business owners to be employers, particularly as the full scale of job losses has been masked by the furlough scheme. It must not inhibit entrepreneurial ventures and must support those who take a chance and put their resources into their dream of owning their own business and play such an important and active role in our economy.

We had issues with our economy long before the pandemic or even Brexit. We had to boost our historically low productivity and move away from low-skilled, low-paying jobs to give our citizens a brighter future and brighter prospects at home. Rates and taxation are only one part of the equation, but they are an important one. If

we do not get it right this time, it can hinder what we do in other areas.

**Mr Muir:** I will be brief, reflecting custom and practice on the subject in previous years. First, I echo the comments about Steve Aiken. He will not be going far, but I wish him best wishes for the future.

The Alliance Party welcomes the action taken thus far in freezing the regional rate and the reliefs that have been offered to certain sectors and those for the last four months of the last financial year. However, as Matthew O'Toole outlined, there are issues in relation to the rating system in Northern Ireland. We face a real cliff edge at the end of this financial year and moving into 2022-23. As part of that, we desperately need an independent review of the rating system, particularly the non-domestic rating system, which is a particular concern.

A review was undertaken by Land and Property Services (LPS), but there needs to be an independent review similar to that conducted in Scotland in order to get authority and respect from the business community and to reflect the issues that I have picked up from traders who are now able to reopen, thanks to the relaxation of the restrictions. They find it tough to swallow to see online retailers, operating from much smaller premises, paying proportionately less in rates, whereas they, on the high street, face significant bills, potentially from the next financial year. They want a fairer and more equitable playing field, to ensure that they can succeed and grow as businesses. We need that independent review of the non-domestic rating system. That is desperately required, and, if we do not get it, we will have the continuation of a broken system. Some of the changes recommended by LPS may be enacted, but they will not attract that level of respect.

We had Reval2020 last year. When the Assembly returned in January, that was a big focus. That dissipated because of the reliefs that were put in place, and it is still not on the agenda. If we do not have that review of the rating system and go back to the full system from the next financial year, we will have serious issues. Hospitality businesses were crying out with the impact of Reval2020. To hit them with the impact of that, just as they are trying to get back on their feet in the next financial year, would be wrong.

I urge the Minister to consider that.

**Mr Murphy:** I thank all who have contributed to the debate. As I stated, the Rates (Regional Rates) Order 2021 gives effect to decisions that were made as part of the Executive's 2021-22 Budget, the wider detail of which was presented to the Assembly on 27 April. The Executive's aim continues to be to strike the correct balance between meeting the needs of ratepayers during what will be a challenging long-term economic environment and ensuring that public finances are sufficient to cover the priorities that we have set ourselves beyond the pandemic. A number of Members correctly highlighted that in their contribution: the economic challenges, as opposed to the revenue that we need to raise in order to support public services. That is the balance to be struck at any time but particularly at such an uncertain time. Faced with the twin effects of Brexit and the pandemic, those things need to be very carefully considered with the information that we have available.

As some Members pointed out, the fiscal commission will be useful this year. We could have done with one many

years back, as Scotland and Wales have. Certainly, in this year, we must use what limited resources we have to support businesses and jobs. This is not just about business people; it is about the jobs that are created and the families that rely on those businesses. We need to supplement as best we can public services, which have already suffered from eight or nine years of Tory austerity. I think that the fiscal commission to look at the overall finances and the fiscal council, which will examine public spend, will be important in the year ahead.

Andrew Muir, who has left the Chamber, raised the issue of the review. The review is not conducted by LPS on its own; it is done in consultation with all the business organisations. A range of the matters raised were taken on board from the previous review. As he said, there is a revaluation exercise and a commitment to do those more frequently. When there is such a gap between them, the revaluations can be quite traumatic and difficult for businesses. The more frequent the revaluations, the less of a shift in what certain businesses pay.

Andrew and others raised the issue of online business.

Of course, particularly during the pandemic, as I said, online became more popular when retail was closed down. However, rates can be assessed only on the size of a property; you cannot assess them on the basis of what business is done. Therefore, actually, the issue that the Member raises is a taxation issue. It would be something else if the Government in London decided to place more tax on online businesses in order to try to create some balance between what online and high-street retailers pay in property tax. However, rates and the issues that we are debating can only take account of the physical size of a property and apply a tax according to that size. Of course, there are reliefs built in as well, but the issue that the Member raises is definitely a taxation issue. We will continue to talk to the Treasury about that.

In conclusion, I trust that Members will show the necessary support for the order. I particularly thank the Committee Chair — as others have, I wish him well in whatever lies ahead for him — the Committee itself and the Committee staff for their work on the order. I look forward to working with them on the wider rating issues over the remainder of the mandate.

**Mr Speaker:** I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 be affirmed.*

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

## Private Members' Business

### Climate Change Bill: Second Stage

**Ms Bailey:** I beg to move

*That the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill [NIA 19/17-22] be agreed.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has not allocated a time limit to this debate.

**Ms Bailey:** Before I begin, I will also take this opportunity to wish Mr Aiken good luck. I am delighted that he is remaining as an MLA because he is always a very positive person to work with. I wish him well.

The Bill sets a framework for climate change adaptation and mitigation in Northern Ireland. Since 2008, climate change legislation has been slowly but steadily emerging around the world.

Although we no longer have the opportunity to be global leaders by bringing forward the legislation, our hope is that the Bill will serve to finally enable Northern Ireland to play its part in tackling the biggest issue of our time: climate breakdown.

#### 12.30 pm

The scientific consensus is that climate change is real, is a global issue and requires a global-to-local response. The work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is probably the largest and most rigorous examination of a scientific issue in the history of the world. The most recent IPCC report concluded that the "continued emission of greenhouse gases" will increase:

*"the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems."*

Those impacts include irreparably degrading our natural environment, driving species to extinction, worsening chronic and contagious disease, worsening food and water shortages, increasing the risk of pandemics and aggravating mass displacement.

The UN estimates that there could be anywhere between 25 million and one billion environmental migrants by 2050. Northern Ireland needs strong climate legislation in order to ensure that we do our part to tackle the global, social and ecological crises that are inherent in climate breakdown. As global citizens and citizens of a developed country and as politicians and the generation responsible for leaving behind a liveable world for our children and young people, we have a responsibility to act. We cannot continue to lag behind and let others do the hard work for us.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Bailey:** Certainly.

**Mr Allister:** The Member made reference to what the UN has been saying. What does she say to the fact that, in 1982, which is almost 40 years ago, the executive director of the UN environment programme said that, by the turn of the century, we would face:

*"an environmental catastrophe which will witness devastation as complete, as irreversible, as any nuclear holocaust."*

It was wrong then. Why should we believe that it is right now?

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I am certainly not a climate denier or a climate sceptic. I will act on all the work that comes from international bodies and from states across the world in trying to deal with the issue. Even in Northern Ireland, we are seeing the impacts of it, particularly in our weather patterns. I do not think that any of that should be ignored.

The legislation is long overdue. Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK and Ireland with no legally binding greenhouse gas reduction targets. We know that Northern Ireland has an unfortunate track record of poor performance on climate. Our emissions are not falling at anywhere the same rate as those in the rest of the UK. They are 20% here compared with the UK average of 43%. We have actually increased our share of total UK emissions. The role of climate legislation in driving down greenhouse gas emissions cannot be overstated. The commitment to introduce a climate change Act for Northern Ireland was a cornerstone of the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement. NDNA stated:

*“The Executive will introduce legislation and targets for reducing carbon emissions in line with the Paris Climate Change Accord.”*

It also stated:

*“The Executive should bring forward a Climate Change Act to give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning.”*

In February 2020, the Assembly voted to declare a climate emergency and called on the Executive to fulfil the climate action and environmental commitments set out in NDNA. In July 2020, the Assembly passed a motion calling for the urgent introduction of a climate change Act for Northern Ireland within three months. In response to the July motion, the Minister made it clear that he had no intention of bringing forward urgent climate change legislation. He said that the time frame was “impossible to achieve” and that we were “ridiculous” to ask for it. It was in that context of persistent ministerial inaction that a private Member’s Bill became the only option for bringing climate change legislation before the Assembly before the end of the current political mandate. Time is no longer on our side. We need to move far, and we need to move fast. Climate mitigation will impact on all aspects of people’s lives.

The key components of a just transition are citizen participation and democratic decision-making. Partnership and participation are inherent to the Bill. It was co-developed by a partnership of civil society, legal and scientific academic experts and MLAs. It originates from the Climate Coalition Northern Ireland (CCNI), which is Northern Ireland’s largest collaborative body on climate action and has a membership of 390,000. This will continue to be a collaborative process as the Bill makes its way through the various legislative stages to become law. It must be collaborative. I look forward to taking sectoral evidence, through the AERA Committee, and working with the Committee, MLAs, political parties, stakeholders and civic society to strengthen and advance the Bill.

Before I turn to the detail of the Bill, it may be helpful to set out briefly what the Bill does and does not do, and the rationale for that. This is primary legislation, so it is not prescriptive. It is a framework Bill that sets out the

legislative basis upon which to build future climate policy. It does not assign sectoral-specific targets or dictate departmental policy. The Bill sets out a sustainable pathway to decarbonisation for Northern Ireland, ensuring transparency and democratic oversight at every stage and guaranteeing independent monitoring so that the democratic oversight can be effective.

The Bill is divided into three Parts. It is made up of 17 clauses and two schedules. In broad terms, it does the following. First, it declares a climate emergency as the basis for government action to halt human-induced global warming. Secondly, it mandates that the Executive, within three years of Royal Assent, prepare five-yearly climate action plans containing annual targets, carbon budgets, nitrogen budgets and sectoral plans. Thirdly, the Bill establishes the Northern Ireland climate commissioner and climate office to independently oversee the implementation of the Bill and review its working, making recommendations as required to achieve the overriding climate objective. Lastly, the Bill guarantees non-regression in Northern Ireland law from existing climate and environmental protections contained in EU law as it applied before the end of the Brexit transition period. Of course, this is already provided for in the withdrawal Act.

The Bill is broadly broken down as follows. Clause 1 provides for the declaration of a climate emergency from the date of Royal Assent. In declaring a climate emergency, we acknowledge that climate change exists and that the measures taken to this point have not been enough to address it. We recognise the role that Governments have in introducing measures that will halt climate change. The climate emergency will outlive successive Assembly terms. The annulment of the emergency requires Assembly approval and must be based on verifiable proof from a relevant body that the global temperature threshold defined in the Paris agreement or any subsequent agreement has been met. The Assembly can redeclare a climate emergency at any point.

Clause 2 relates to the creation of climate action plans, which are policy documents that detail the steps that will be taken to address the challenges of climate change in Northern Ireland. The plans must be approved by the Assembly and must achieve the overriding climate objective: the establishment in Northern Ireland of a net zero carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable economy by 2045. This target of 2045 is ambitious but achievable, and it reflects the general legislative trend towards strong climate legislation and the urgency to do as much as possible as quickly as possible. The net zero year may be altered by order of the Executive but cannot be amended to a year after 2045. Each climate action plan will be prepared by the Executive Office and laid before the Assembly for its approval. The first plan must be laid within three years of the Bill being enacted and every five years thereafter. Clause 2 also defines aspects of the “overriding climate objective”, such as net zero and climate resilience. It lists the seven greenhouse gases that must be included in the net zero target.

Clause 3 states that climate action plans will be made up of “targets” and “measures”. Targets will be for greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity, water quality and soil quality. That is because climate change is caused by greenhouse gas emissions but manifests itself in declining water and

soil quality, and biodiversity. Any climate action plan must, therefore, consider those areas as key performance indicators. Measures look at how targets will be implemented. Measures include carbon budgets, nitrogen budgets and sectoral plans across the Northern Ireland economy.

The clause sets out what must be taken into account when setting targets. Targets are set after obtaining advice from the relevant expert body, and certain things must be taken into account. Those include international law and the impact that a target will have on the environment, public health and well-being in Northern Ireland's specific economic and social circumstances. That is key to ensuring that targets are fair and do not disproportionately impact on one group while ensuring that the Bill is effective and achieves its overriding climate objective.

Other provisions in clause 3 include details of what must be taken into account in carbon and nitrogen budgets, including the requirement to take transboundary impacts into account; requirements for DAERA to create a scheme to track carbon usage and its purchase of carbon units; the requirement to take transboundary elements into account; details of which sectors must be included in sectoral plans; and the just transition principles to which those plans must be subject. The inclusion of just transition principles is an important part of ensuring that the change to a net zero carbon society will mean a better and fairer society for all.

The clause states:

*"sectoral plans shall also—*

*(a) support jobs and growth of jobs that are climate resilient and environmentally and socially sustainable;*

*(b) support net-zero carbon investment and infrastructure;*

*(c) create work which is high-value, fair and sustainable;*

*(d) reduce inequality as far as possible;*

*(e) reduce, with a view to eliminating, poverty and social deprivation".*

Clause 4 provides for implementation reports to be laid before the Assembly each year for the duration of the climate action plan. It sets out how the reports should be set out and what they should contain. That includes whether the annual target was met; reasons for failure to meet targets; progress on each sectoral policy and the likelihood of full policy implementation; and the likelihood of the overriding climate objective being achieved.

Part 2 relates to the Northern Ireland climate office and the Northern Ireland climate commissioner. Clauses 5 to 10 and schedules 1 and 2 establish the Northern Ireland climate office and the Northern Ireland climate commissioner, and outline the climate commissioner's powers and functions. The climate commissioner will provide independent scrutiny and oversight of the Act. Similar to the Public Services Ombudsman, the climate commissioner will not be under the direction of any Department or Minister, the Assembly, the Assembly Commission or any local authority. The manner of appointment of the climate commissioner by the Crown on nomination by the Assembly is to allow maximum independence from government.

The climate commissioner will not have enforcement powers, but, similarly to independent climate bodies in other jurisdictions, will have the power to make recommendations and raise issues that the Executive will be mandated to address.

The climate commissioner will have two main functions: to monitor the implementation of the climate action plans and make annual reports to the Assembly on the issue; and to produce, at least once an Assembly term, an independent review report on the functioning and effectiveness of the Act, recommending any amendments that are considered necessary to achieve the overriding climate objective. Those functions will create an important statutory discourse that will allow climate action plans to be flexibly rooted in independent science.

Clause 11 concerns the alteration of climate action plans following the climate commissioner's annual report.

**12.45 pm**

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Bailey:** I certainly will.

**Mr Allister:** Before the Member leaves Part 2, will she give some explanation to the House of what clause 6(8) means? Clause 6(8) states:

*"The Climate Commissioner may do anything (including acquire or dispose of property or rights) which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to, the discharge of the functions of the Climate Commissioner."*

What rights is it anticipated that the climate commissioner could dispose of under clause 6(8)?

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member for his intervention. It is not envisaged in the Bill that the climate commissioner will have any enforcement powers; it is simply a monitoring and reporting function to assess how the legislation is progressing.

I have lost my place, Mr Speaker, so I will start again on clause 11. Clause 11 relates to the alteration of climate action plans following the climate commissioner's annual report. Following the laying of the annual report by the climate commissioner, the Executive Office must prepare its response — this may address the Member's point — including any proposed alterations to targets or measures. In altering the climate action plan, the Executive Office must not directly or indirectly lower targets or standards. Alterations must be approved by the Assembly. In that and in its other processes, the Bill outperforms other climate legislation around the world because it enshrines democracy and transparency in law.

Democracy is key to a just transition. Society will shift and change, and conversations about how that happens cannot be had in a room with the doors closed. Every aspect of this just transition will be debated openly and transparently, ensuring democratic oversight and engagement.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I thank the Member for giving way. Is that why you engaged in a public consultation process? Did you engage in a public consultation process? If you did, can you make us aware of it?



**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Minister for his comments. I would be a bit surprised if he were not aware that a private Member's Bill is not mandated to go out to public consultation. There will be evidence sessions on the Bill with all stakeholders at Committee Stage, if it passes Second Stage today.

Clause 12 provides a duty that there must be no regression from the environmental standards that were in place when Northern Ireland left the EU. That is already a condition of the withdrawal agreement. Moreover, nothing in the Bill will override an Act of Parliament.

Back in July, Minister Poots said that we should not use language such as "emergency" or "crisis", but the science does not lie. The climate crisis is already here. Higher temperatures are causing drought and widespread crop failures. Wildfires, storms in the north Atlantic, rising tides and flooding are part of long-term trends. As the Arctic warms, permafrost melts, releasing even more carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere. We are moving ever closer to the point at which climate change cannot be managed and controlled by humans.

Every tiny incremental temperature rise counts. The more heat that gets added to the earth's climate system, the more out of balance natural systems will get. The more out of balance natural systems get, the more destruction and suffering we will see. We are already sitting at 1.3°C of warming. At 1.5°C of warming, we will push past the turning point, and climate change impacts will go from destructive to catastrophic. At 2°C of warming, we see simultaneous global crop failure, representing a threat to global food security. In a modest mitigation scenario, we will hit 2°C of warming as early as 2038. At 3°C of warming, which, scientists believe, looks increasingly likely between 2050 and 2100, we will have surpassed a tipping point from which there is no return, with humans powerless to intervene as planetary temperatures soar. Warming of 3°C risks seeing the almost total loss of the Amazon rainforest, with drought and fires turning trees back into carbon dioxide as they burn or rot and decompose. The Met Office has warned that we could see 4°C of warming by 2060 without immediate action on emissions. Climate scientist Kevin Anderson said that 4°C of warming would be:

*"incompatible with any reasonable characterisation of an organised, equitable and civilised global community."*

If that is not an emergency, what is?

Climate change, like COVID-19, requires a global-to-local response and long-term thinking guided by science and the need to protect the most vulnerable. It requires the political will to make fundamental changes to the way we live our lives in order to respond to what is an existential threat to humanity and all life on earth. The Bill will provide a legal framework to decarbonise the economy in a way that tackles inequality and enhances the lives of ordinary people, our workers and our communities. The transition to a green economy must be underpinned by values of social justice and the principle that no one gets left behind.

Finally, I pay tribute to all the activists and environmentalists who have got us to this point today and to all our children and young people who took part in the Fridays for Future strikes in Belfast and further afield for so long and had the vision and determination to demand

more of us on climate breakdown. You showed us what democracy looks like, and we continue in that spirit in the Bill. I pay tribute to Climate Coalition Northern Ireland, whose resolve to see climate change legislation has resulted in the Bill that we have before us today. To have a Climate Change Bill debated in the Chamber is a first for Northern Ireland, and we should not forget that. I look forward to the debate and commend the Bill to the House.

**Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** The Bill has a number of co-sponsors, with the main sponsor being Clare Bailey. The Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs heard from Ms Bailey and other witnesses at our meeting on 29 April. Ms Bailey is also a member of our Committee, as are two other co-sponsors, namely Philip McGuigan and John Blair.

Ms Bailey gave evidence to the Committee as a witness and not as an MLA. She was accompanied by Dr Amanda Slevin, Mr Anurag Deb and Mr Philip Carson, all of whom have also been heavily involved in drafting the Bill. Ms Bailey told the Committee that the Bill originated with the Climate Coalition, which is a network organisation representing more than 400,000 people across the region. It was a priority of that organisation to develop an ambitious climate change Bill based on the best available science and for it to be introduced as a matter of urgency.

Let me give you some background to the Committee's work on climate change overall. The AERA Committee brought a motion to the Assembly on 21 July 2020 calling for the introduction of a climate change Act. That motion was endorsed by the Assembly. Since then, we have heard on a number of occasions from DAERA officials about the Minister's plans to produce an Executive climate change Bill. We have also heard about the links to the green growth environment framework, about which the Committee has been unable to get definite detail. During the sessions, officials told us about DAERA's consultation on a climate change Bill, outlined that the issue had risen up the agenda and gave a preliminary policy position on what might be in it.

The DAERA proposal was to be based on a target of an 82% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050. That target is based on advice from the UK Climate Change Committee (CCC). The AERA Committee also heard from the CCC —.

**Dr Aiken:** Will the Chairman give way?

**Mr McAleer:** Sorry, yes.

**Dr Aiken:** For clarification, that is "at least an 82% reduction" in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, from the Climate Change Committee report.

**Mr McAleer:** Yes, Mr Aiken, that is correct: at least 82%.

We had an interesting exchange with the chairperson of the CCC and some of his board's members, and we explored the advice that has been adopted by DAERA regarding the 82% reduction by 2050 for this jurisdiction. The target forms a central point of difference between the Bill before us today and the Bill that, DAERA officials indicated, was likely to come to the Assembly. I have no doubt that this target will be one of the most debated aspects of the Bill during its legislative passage. It already causes considerable debate and discussion in the wider community, particularly among the farming sector. That is to be welcomed. We are glad to

see that the issue has risen up the agenda and that people, including the farming and rural communities, are discussing climate change. I assure you that, if the Bill passes the Second Stage and comes back to the Committee, we will allow plenty of time for the views of the agri-food and all those sectors to be heard and debated.

The Bill has a number of aims, which Ms Bailey has outlined. It is useful to go over them again. The Committee heard that it is a framework Bill. It is not prescriptive but sets out a pathway to net zero while ensuring transparency and democratic oversight. It begins by declaring a climate emergency and establishes that as the mandate for mitigation and adaptation. It also sets out how the climate emergency can be annulled. It sets the target of reaching net zero by 2045 and mandates the Executive, within three years of the Bill being passed, to prepare five-year climate action plans to reach that target.

The action plans are made up of two parts: targets and measures. Measures will look at carbon and nitrogen budgets and sectoral plans across a range of areas such as power generation and supply; transport, including shipping and aviation; residential and public buildings; waste management; infrastructure; land use; land-use change; and agriculture. The targets have provisions in place to protect biodiversity, water and soil quality and will include nitrogen budgets. The targets are included because the quality of those things is so closely linked to climate change.

The Bill also has provisions to take trans-boundary impacts into account to track carbon usage etc. Importantly, the Bill also has provisions for a just transition, which have been included to ensure that the change to net zero will mean a fairer and better society for all of us. The Bill also provides for the establishment of a climate commissioner and climate office and for non-regression of our law from existing climate and environmental protections set out in EU law, as it applied before the end of the —.

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McAleer:** Yes.

**Mr Poots:** Can you stand over that statement of society being “fairer for all”? The Climate Change Committee indicates a 50% reduction in dairy and a 50% reduction in beef, for example. If that happens, it will migrate what is left of that sector onto the lowlands. In that case, the hill farmers that you have referred to very often will suffer most, and they will not get fairness and equity with the Bill that is being promoted by the private Member.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Regarding fairness and justness, Ms Bailey outlined that the climate action plans that are part of the proposed Bill, which will come before the Assembly every five years, will come about only through extensive and detailed public consultation with farmers and rural stakeholders. We want the climate action plans to be just, manageable and deliverable, and we certainly do not want them to inhibit or decimate farming here in the North in any way. I restate that we have plans, from now until 16 December, to scrutinise the draft framework legislation rigorously. It is a framework that will effectively be filled out by secondary legislation, so no surprises will come down the line for farmers. There will be a consultation exercise, and the Bill will be rigorously debated. We will hear evidence from Lord Deben and the UK Climate Change Committee, but we will also hear evidence from other experts from Ireland — from

the Teagasc — and internationally to tease all of this out as we move through the scrutiny process.

**Mr McGuigan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McAleer:** He asked first. You can go next.

#### 1.00 pm

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Member for giving way and for his response to the Minister. Does the Member agree with me that, as was stated even by the Member who moved the Bill, that, regardless of what the CCC said in its letter, this framework Bill does not actually assign any sectoral-specific targets or interfere with departmental policy?

**Mr McAleer:** The Member is correct: this framework Bill does not stipulate that at all. As I say, the climate action plans will be five-yearly climate action plans. There has to be a 16-week consultation to sign off on those climate action plans. They have to be signed off by the Executive and the Assembly following rigorous consultation with the farming community and all the other stakeholders.

**Mr Allister:** I hear what the Member says, but has he read clause 11(2)(e), which is very clear:

*“the Executive Office must not propose any alteration which has the effect, whether directly or indirectly, of lowering any target under section 3(2) of this Act from the level approved by the Assembly under section 2(3)”?*

How can he say that there is always the option to look again? There is no option in the Bill to look again; none whatsoever. It is set in stone.

**Mr McAleer:** This is a Bill of the Assembly. It is under the ownership of the Assembly. As I say, at the moment, it is framework legislation. Everyone will have their say as it is fleshed out, including Mr Allister, who will no doubt have plenty to say, because he has plenty to say at other times.

*(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair)*

Going back to where we were, the Committee explored these principles with Ms Bailey and other witnesses. I will outline some of the thoughts of the Committee. It is fair to say that the Committee spent considerable time exploring the implications of the 100% net zero target by 2045. As I noted earlier, many, particularly in the agri-food sector, have real concerns with this target because of advice from the CCC that such a target would mean radical change for the farming sector. The CCC has:

*“recommended that any climate legislation for”*

here should

*“include a target to reduce all greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 82% by 2050”.*

That is the point on which Mr Aiken sought clarity just a moment ago. It is important to emphasise that the CCC uses the phrase “at least 82% by 2050”, because it has been clear that it sees its recommendation as a minimum target. The CCC analysis is based on our position as a strong agri-food exporter to Britain, combined with our:

*“more limited capabilities to use ‘engineered’ greenhouse gas removal technologies”.*

This means that we are:

*“likely to remain a small net source of greenhouse gas emissions – almost entirely from agriculture”.*

The CCC further stated:

*“those residual emissions should be offset by actions in”*

Britain.

At the request of DAERA, further advice from the CCC was obtained. It has also been considered by the Committee. That advice is available on our website for anyone who is interested. The CCC advice suggests:

*“Going further to reach Net Zero in 2050 would likely require either (or both) of ...*

*A larger reduction in output from”*

our

*“livestock sector compared to”*

other regions and more farming land released for carbon capture. The CCC has created various scenarios to get us to net zero, suggesting:

*“Even our most stretching Tailwinds scenario – which entails a 50% fall in meat and dairy production”*

here

*“by 2050 and significantly greater levels of tree planting on the land released – is not enough to get”*

this jurisdiction

*“to Net Zero emissions in 2050.”*

There is a fear among the agriculture sector that it could be disproportionately impacted on by the Bill. That impact would extend beyond farming into the processing and manufacturing sectors. It is also fair to say that the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), in particular, is very concerned about the impact of the Bill. There are real concerns for some of our farming communities. Others fear that a cut in livestock numbers here could lead to food being imported from other countries that do not produce it to the same high standards as we do. The Committee explored this in some detail. We are aware that we have a population of 1.8 million and produce sufficient food, mostly dairy and meat, for 10 million people. We heard from witnesses that the UK consumes double the recommended amount of animal-based protein and that reducing that can be beneficial for public health. The dietary and lifestyle changes that will be required to meet the target were explored.

Ms Bailey said that she and her colleagues had met some of the farming sector bodies and that, after listening to their concerns, she wished to put on the record that there is nothing in the Bill that will harm the agriculture sector. She noted that the Bill does not mandate any immediate changes to the agriculture sector, nor is it prescriptive. There are no specific targets allocated to individual sectors, and, because some sectors, such as transport and energy, are ready to move immediately and quickly, agriculture may have a more gradual transition. It was also pointed out that the CCC had explored very few pathways

for change that include future developments in low-carbon farming measures.

The witnesses further noted that the assumption that we cannot reach net zero by 2045 has not been fully investigated, and they provided examples of what can be done. Moreover, what is happening in Wales and Scotland should be noted. Initially, the CCC recommended to Wales a target of 92% to net zero. That was based on the importance of livestock to the agriculture sector. Wales has taken that on board and moved beyond it. The Committee took that discussion further by considering the impact of climate change on farming, particularly the economic costs of severe weather. One witness referred to research that indicated that climate change has cost the Scottish industry around £161 million and that, on a global basis, climate change has reduced productivity by 21% since the 1960s.

The Committee also considered the transboundary provisions in the Bill, and an important aspect of those is that we share a land border with another jurisdiction on this island. In practical terms, a farmer in the border regions might have some land on either side of the land borders. The difficulties that might be created, particularly as the targets in the Bill are different from those in the South, were discussed.

The consultation with various sectors was discussed. We heard that the Climate Coalition, which had been working with Ms Bailey on drafting a Bill, is the largest civic society network for climate change here, with its member organisations representing over 400,000 people. It did intensive consultation with its members throughout the development of the Bill. There has also been engagement with key stakeholders, including NIAPA, Farmers for Action, departmental officials and energy companies. There are plans for further consultation as the Bill progresses. The Committee was made aware that the UFU strongly indicated that it has major concerns with the Bill. I noted that the Committee explored in great detail the implications of reaching a climate change target by 2050. I will not go over that again.

The next matter discussed by the Committee was the principle of a just transition. We heard that that principle is deeply embedded in the Bill. The witnesses provided further detail about what it means by reference to a paper from the COP26 Universities Network. They also outlined the dimensions of social justice, procedural justice, distributive justice, recognition justice and restorative justice. The aim to reduce inequality, eliminate poverty and social deprivation, to support high net zero carbon investment and infrastructure and to create work that is high-value, fair and sustainable is part of the Bill.

In exploring that principle, food security was discussed. Witnesses noted that perhaps the biggest threat to food security is climate change and that it will force change in how we maintain capacity in the land to produce food in the longer term. We discussed the independent environmental protection agency, the IEPA, and its crossover, including possible joint working, with the climate change commissioner.

The commissioner will have two main functions. The first will be to report on the implementation of climate action plans for the duration of those plans. The second function will be to report on the effectiveness of the Bill once it is enacted and to recommend any changes in order to ensure

that the net zero target is achieved. The commissioner will provide the Assembly and its Committees with the evidence on what is going right, what is going wrong and what can be improved.

It is vital that the legislation is kept under review. That review should take account of developments in science and technology and in our understanding of how climate change works and can be abated. To that end, it is envisaged that the commissioner will make recommendations on how we can improve the methods that we use to achieve net zero. We noted that the commissioner will not have enforcement powers. The Committee noted proposals that the remit of the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP) be extended to here with the approval of the Assembly in order to include enforcement powers relating to climate change.

I outlined some of the Committee's exploration of the principles of the Bill. In summary, the issue that the Committee paid most attention to was the impact on the agri-food industry of the 100% net zero by 2045 target. Some of our Committee members are very concerned about this aspect. Most are being lobbied very hard on this target, as I have been. However, overall, the Bill was broadly welcomed by the AERA Committee, and, if it receives Assembly approval today, we will look forward to scrutinising it in further detail at Committee Stage. That concludes what I have to say as Chair of the AERA Committee.

I want to comment in my capacity as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs. In supporting the Bill, we want to assure farmers and those involved in the agri-food industry that we fully recognise the vital role that agriculture plays by producing safe and secure food, sustaining rural communities and underpinning over 100,000 jobs in the North. All of us who have been through the COVID pandemic during the last year appreciate the vital role played by farmers and the agri-food processing industry in keeping our food supplies moving during very difficult and challenging times.

We also recognise the huge environmental contribution that our farmers, as custodians of the countryside, make to the preservation of biodiversity, water quality and animal health standards. Farmers, from experience, know that they are in the front line of extreme weather events brought about by climate change. We need look no further than my constituency of West Tyrone, where we had severe landslides in the Sperrins four years ago. Indeed, in recent weeks, the Minister paid a very welcome visit there. The landslides devastated farms, livestock and properties. With the earth heating up and sea levels rising, unless we take action, these events will become more common.

Across the world, 197 countries have signed up to the Paris climate change agreement. These countries have pledged to take steps to keep the global temperature rise to less than 2°C above pre-industrial levels. To fulfil this, Britain — Scotland, England and Wales — and the South of Ireland have passed climate change Acts that commit them to reducing their greenhouse gas emissions and becoming carbon neutral in the next 24 to 29 years. The North is the only part of these islands that does not have a climate change Act, and this sends out the wrong message to the international world about our commitment to sustainable and environmental practices. We have a very strong and good message to send to the rest of the

world, and that will be undermined if we do not commit to ambitious and deliverable climate change targets. If the North does not adopt a climate change Act in accordance with the Paris agreement, it could reduce our ability to access international markets for our produce. This would be particularly pronounced as the South of Ireland and the other regions of these islands have committed to climate neutrality by 2045 to 2050. During the conversation that I had with Lord Deben of the UK CCC, he made the point that, if we do not agree to sign up to a climate change Act, we will be punished by the rest of the world. That could also create unforeseen problems, as virtually all our agri-food and our dairy products are processed in both parts of the island and are deemed mixed origin.

We know that farmers have concerns about the implications of this Private Member's Bill. We all will have received lobbies and presentations about this legitimate concern. On Friday, with my Sinn Féin colleagues, I met a number of leading agri-food stakeholders and listened to their concerns. It is important that we take on board these legitimate concerns as we go forward to scrutinise the clauses. We must ensure that these stakeholders not only have their voices heard but get involved in the process of trying to shape the Bill as we move ahead through the next six months of rigorous scrutiny.

The Bill, as previously said, is a framework. It proposes a number of structures, a climate change office, a commissioner and climate change plans. I re-emphasise that these plans will be co-designed with rural stakeholders and will be subject to public consultation before they are agreed by the Executive and the Assembly. There will be a lot of the rigorous scrutiny and involvement that we want to see being part of the Bill.

The Bill does not contain sanction powers. Any plans will have to take account of the fiscal, social and economic impacts here in the North. In addition, the farming sector is not being asked to make any changes for the next three years.

#### 1.15 pm

I underline again the commitment of my party and, indeed, the Committee to scrutinise the Bill rigorously over the next six or seven months. We have identified a range of experts. It will be debated and discussed at length by the Agriculture Committee. The Assembly will come back to it on more than one occasion. There will be public consultation exercises before the Bill becomes law. The Committee agreed to that range of stakeholders, experts and round-table events, as well as public consultation using Citizen Space for members of the public to have their say as the Bill unfolds and develops.

What is being asked of farmers in the private Member's Bill is that, over the next 24 years, they will take steps to balance out the amount of greenhouse gases that their farms produce with what they absorb or sequester. We have looked at other regions for evidence of how that may be achieved. Rather than decimating herds and farm businesses, we believe that reducing greenhouse gas emissions can be achieved through production efficiency, which also leads to profitability. Indeed, experts from Teagasc in the South of Ireland have identified actions such as extending the grazing season, mixed-grass swards, changing to protected urea fertiliser, reducing losses from slurry and substituting clover for chemical

fertiliser that can help to reduce emissions while cutting costs; indeed, last year, farmers in the South of Ireland were able to reduce emissions by 6%.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Member for giving way. I concur totally with his comments about the importance of the farming and rural community's participation in shaping the Bill. Much will be made and said today about specific lines in the CCC's letter to the Minister or the Committee. Less will be said about other more positive lines and paragraphs in that letter. In its 'Sixth Carbon Budget' report, the CCC says:

*"The [greenhouse gas] impacts of [less-intensive farming or agroecology options] are not included in [the CCC] scenarios due to the lack of robust evidence on the abatement potential".*

Does the Member agree with my reading of that, which is that the CCC's estimates of potential reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture here are incomplete and are therefore currently underestimates?

**Mr McAleer:** Yes. I agree with what the Member has said. There needs to be more exploration through the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and the Department to look at the abatement potential, because one thing that farmers, North and South, have been saying to us is that they do not feel that the amount of carbon that they sequester has been properly calculated. We need to have that if we are to arrive at a proper assessment to reach net zero.

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for giving way. It is important that we debate that issue fully because we have not had a public consultation. I have to say that it is poor form not to have had that consultation, irrespective of whether it had to be done.

With regard to mixed clover and all the issues that the Member has raised as potential abatements, I accept that and agree that they have potential. However, one of the people who are most involved in this is Dr John Gilliland. There is an invitation for the Member to visit the farm at Douth, and I have that invitation also. Just this morning, we received a letter from Dr Gilliland expressing concern on the issue. Even the people who are at the cutting edge to which the Member has referred are concerned about the Bill. It will have most impact on the farms that are less productive currently. As the Member knows, the less productive farms are those on the hills.

**Mr McAleer:** Yes. Through the UFU, I have accepted that invitation and look forward to visiting that farm in County Louth — absolutely. I want to pick up on some of those points. We want to hear more of that sort of information and to scrutinise it during the next six months. That is really important. I was looking at DAERA's website to see what mechanisms it has to give farmers some sort of baseline for what they are producing and emitting, and it has the bovine information system (BovIS) calculator. The Department's note states:

*"Reducing greenhouse gas emissions involves understanding the relationship between soils, livestock and environmental farm management, but, fortunately, lower GHG emissions are generally linked to improved production and profitability."*

We must explore as far as possible the on-farm options.

I will get back to what I was saying. There are many experts that we need to hear from, including the UK CCC and Teagasc in the South of Ireland. Teagasc has identified actions that I have mentioned previously. Other advances have been made in areas such as beef genomics and in soil management, which is about getting the pH level right. Reducing crude protein and incorporating specific minerals and even seaweed extracts into cattle diets have been identified as being effective means of reducing emissions. GHG emissions can also be balanced at farm level through environmental actions such as hedgerow and tree planting, the re-wetting of bogs and appropriate nutrient management of soils to maximise their carbon storage potential. As the Minister brings forward his new agriculture and rural policy, it is important that those actions be factored into it.

I restate that all of this will be rigorously scrutinised and teased out by the AERA Committee in partnership with the agri-food sector, climate change experts and, of course, the public through Citizen Space and stakeholder events.

The aim of the Bill is for the agriculture industry to achieve net zero GHG emissions by 2045. We do not believe that agriculture should be scaled back in order to achieve that. We do not want to see production being inhibited or the problem being offloaded to somewhere else, which is known as carbon leakage. We strongly do not believe that the only solution for reaching net zero is to reduce herd sizes and decimate farm businesses. We could not stand over the decimation of farming in Ireland or the exporting of emissions to other countries. That would be a complete contradiction of our commitment to tackling the global crisis.

To become carbon-neutral in the next 24 years, farmers also need to have a baseline. Farmers need to know where they stand on progress towards carbon neutrality. In fact, many farmers may be more carbon-neutral than they think they are. While researching for today's debate, I noted with interest recent comments by the Irish Farmers' Association's County Kerry chair that many farms are already carbon-neutral. There is a huge onus on DAERA and AFBI to develop an accurate carbon calculator that builds on the BovIS GHG calculator. Farmers need an accurate picture of where they are on the pathway to being carbon-neutral that accurately assesses the huge amount of carbon that is sequestered by hedges, bogs and the grasslands that they manage. The South already has that pathway through its marginal abatement cost curve, which was developed in conjunction with leading national and international experts and scientists and sets out 26 actions that can be taken on-farm to reduce emissions and increase efficiency and profitability. We need to learn from that body of research and, indeed, from the extensive research that has been done in the North and in other regions nationally and internationally. We also need to work with farmers to help them develop the road map.

I cannot underline strongly enough how deeply we appreciate vital role that farm businesses play in our society, and we want to work in partnership with the farming community to support it in putting in place a manageable transition that helps it achieve carbon neutrality.

**Mr Irwin:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. As someone who has spent his working life farming the land, I am all too aware of the need to address

global emissions in the agriculture industry and many other industries. I do not speak as someone who ignores the ramifications of global emissions; rather, I want to find the best response to such matters, with the twin interests of the planet and our agri-food sector firmly in mind.

I must state that the threat to farming, food production and the economic stability of Northern Ireland could not be starker when the ramifications of the Bill are considered. Ms Bailey has managed to unite the agri-food sector, ordinary farmers and representative farming organisations against her Bill not because they have some fear or unwillingness to protect and enhance the environment — they already try to do that — but because such a Bill, if implemented, would do unimaginable harm to Northern Ireland's food production. The threat posed by the Bill must be weighed against the impact of Northern Ireland's global emissions. According to data, our contribution stands at 0.04%. With that figure firmly in mind, it would be pragmatic and sensible to respond to the threat of global warming with measures that do two things: contribute to a lowering of global emissions proportionally; and ensure that Northern Ireland can continue to have a prosperous economy. Ms Bailey's Bill does neither. That is why it must be voted down.

Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, Northern Ireland's agri-food sector has shown itself to be a resilient industry that prides itself in caring for the environment and the livestock that it produces. The Bill and its insistence on reaching net zero by 2045 would require a reduction in the output of Northern Ireland farms that would mean the decimation of Northern Ireland agriculture. That is neither sensible nor good for the environment or the economy.

The Committee heard evidence from Lord Deben on his work on the Climate Change Committee, which has taken a long, detailed, scientific and wide-ranging view of the changes required and has drawn important conclusions that, whilst being a significant challenge, represent a much more achievable road map to the reductions required in line with the broader United Kingdom strategy. The private Member's Bill is simply a hopeful political gamble by the Green Party, which seeks to own any official position targets set by DAERA on the important issues while reducing time frames and, in turn, worryingly, increasing risks for one of Northern Ireland's most important economic sectors.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for giving way. With regard to his last remark about this being some sort of opportunistic attempt by the Green Party to do something, does the Member recognise the cross-party support and involvement in the Bill and the fact that there are co-sponsors from every party in the House, bar his party and the TUV?

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I accept that, but some of those parties are already rowing back from their position. If you had listened carefully to the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee earlier, you would have realised that.

There is much focus on the farming industry, with climate change being considered and much expected of the industry in terms of emissions reductions. However, it is important that we consider the contribution already made by the farming community in assisting in the preservation of the countryside and the wider environment. Indeed, as

I have stated before, it is important that that contribution be accurately measured, as there will be great importance tied to what more agriculture can do. Equally, however, it is important to understand what the industry already does in that regard.

That issue requires much more work to establish a scientific baseline for carbon sequestration. My view is that, by supporting the private Member's Bill, we step outside the advice of independent experts and support unachievable, unjust targets, with the consequence of making farmers redundant, reducing incomes, decreasing herd sizes and increasing production costs and, potentially, land abandonment. We will make redundant the vital role that our farmers play in food production as custodians of the countryside and those who hold many of the assets that we need to help the environment. Therefore, the ironic result of this move would be detrimental to the environment and to tackling climate change because we would increase global emissions by outsourcing our production to countries with less sustainable production methods. Let us approach the debate with sensible, practical heads and deliver a pragmatic solution that works.

### 1.30 pm

I urge Members to rethink the Bill and put efforts behind the Minister's climate change Bill. I also urge other Executive members to get behind those efforts, which represent the very best opportunity to work towards achievable targets. The unilateral support of our farming and food production stakeholders and representative organisations must be at the core of any efforts as full cooperation and buy-in towards addressing emissions will offer the greatest chance of meeting targets. The Bill has failed already in that regard and must be taken off the table.

**Mr Durkan:** I support the Bill and, indeed, I am privileged to be one of its co-sponsors. I have worked with colleagues across party lines on an issue on which we all recognise that something needs to be done.

The urgent need for a climate change Bill has been well established. The extensive body of research demands that we act immediately — globally, locally and as individuals — in response to the emergency. Climate change is, arguably, the most serious threat that we face to not just our environment but our health, economic prosperity and global security. The overwhelming scientific consensus points to the fact that the impacts of climate change are accelerating and that they are largely driven by greenhouse gas emissions as a result of human activity. Sadly, although the science is beyond reproach, it appears, like most things in here, that it is not beyond dispute.

If we are to combat the devastating environmental, health, economic and societal impact of climate change, we have, as Ms Bailey outlined, a responsibility to act. We owe it to ourselves and future generations to face up to that uncomfortable reality. No longer can it be swept under the carpet or stuck in a hole in the ground to be dealt with at a later date. Climate change is here; it is happening. We are already bearing witness to its dire consequences that are playing out globally and here on our own doorstep. Communities here have been devastated by flooding in recent years. Fluctuating weather patterns have seen us experience practically every season in the course of

the last week. If we are to turn back the clock on climate catastrophe, we cannot afford further delay; we must act now.

It remains a stain on Northern Ireland's record that specific legislation on the prevention of climate breakdown, through emissions reduction targets and working towards carbon neutrality or preparing industry for tomorrow's economy, has taken so long to implement. Credit must be given to citizens and councils here, many of whom have been ahead of the curve by taking individual responsibility to consider their own personal choices and to enact green initiatives. In my constituency, Derry City and Strabane District Council has taken action and declared a climate emergency. It has spearheaded the first council climate adaptation plan in the North and has already launched its climate pledge, which commits the city and district to net zero greenhouse emissions by 2045. Vitally, the council has recognised that climate change is not only a global but a transboundary issue. It has developed the first regional energy strategy in Ireland and has an emerging multi-sectoral north-west climate action plan.

The Executive must work to establish an all-island response to climate change, given the similar challenges that we face in both jurisdictions on this small island. In doing so, we could develop a greater harmonisation of climate data; support for just transition; cross-departmental coordination, with supporting policy; and, most importantly, financial and funding mechanisms to deliver action on the ground. To truly effect positive change here, we need a strong legal underpinning of climate principles. It now falls to the Executive and the Assembly to play catch-up in that regard.

Some of my SDLP colleagues will go into more intricate detail on the Bill later. Scientific evidence makes it clear that Northern Ireland needs to meet net zero carbon emissions by 2045. That vision can only be achieved through collaborative working, declaring a climate emergency and establishing a mandate for climate change mitigation and adaptation. The role of a Northern Ireland climate office and climate commissioner as overseers will be integral to accomplishing those goals. I agree that these targets are ambitious, but this is not some pie-in-the-sky notion. Rather, they are ambitious because they have to be.

**Dr Archibald:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Durkan:** Yes, certainly.

**Dr Archibald:** Does the Member agree that it is important that we have ambitious targets, not just as part of our climate legislation but to inform all the other strategies and policies that are brought through by other Departments and to ensure that the targets that are set within those are ambitious as well?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for her intervention, and I agree entirely. Everything that we do as legislators or as a legislative body from here on has to take those issues into consideration. We are right to be ambitious and to aim high. For too long, the Executive have rested on their laurels, not to mention the three years of complete inaction that we had in the absence of an Executive, to the detriment of denizens and climate. Successive Administrations here have failed the wishes of some MLAs — I say that as a former Environment Minister — and of people and the deluge of scientific evidence in our inability

to grasp the single greatest issue of our time. It has taken a cross-party coalition of MLAs to push forward this crucial legislation, despite the prevarication of others.

In January 2020, all parties committed themselves to the introduction of a climate change Act under New Decade, New Approach, and again, last July, Members stood in this Chamber making the same appeals and similar arguments when we called on Minister Poots to introduce a climate change Bill within three months. Now, almost a year down the line, Northern Ireland remains the only jurisdiction in these islands without greenhouse gas reduction targets enshrined in law. While the impact of COVID may, in part, explain the recent delay, it cannot be used as an excuse.

The focus on green recovery and the creation of a sustainable society is of even greater significance as we emerge from the fog of COVID. If we have learnt anything from this horrific year, it is that we must do things differently. The pandemic has served as a reminder of the delicate and unpredictable balance between humans and the natural world. It has also given many the opportunity to reconnect with our natural environment and to realise the importance of protecting it. We now need to witness a sea change in behaviours by the powers that be. However, this is the time not for finger-pointing but for rolling up our sleeves and getting our noses to the grindstone. I must, at this point, pay tribute to Climate Coalition Northern Ireland, which has not let up in that regard. It has been an invaluable resource and has worked tirelessly in its mission to put climate action firmly on the agenda. I also thank all the schools, groups, families and individuals who are not only adapting their own ways of doing things, but educating others on the need to change.

So many people and organisations are doing their bit. Within the Executive, my party colleague the Infrastructure Minister, Nichola Mallon, has led the charge. She has wasted no time since taking office in embedding climate change adaptation strategies in her Department. She has placed greater focus on green recovery, including investing in zero-carbon public transport and climate-friendly street lighting and creating a £20 million blue-green infrastructure fund. It is important that, while climate action will be a challenge for all Departments to overcome, Minister Mallon has demonstrated that, even in a Department where climate change targets have posed some of the biggest challenges, she is not afraid to take them on. She has stepped up to the plate and, leading by example, created a picture of what is possible for others to do.

We cannot pretend, however, that there has been, is or even will be consensus on this issue. Reservations and, in some cases, outright opposition about the targets that are set out in the Climate Change Bill have once more reared their head, not unexpectedly, from certain quarters in industry and agriculture. The commercial concerns that have been expressed have perennially been reflected in political opposition to a climate change Act from some quarters in the House. While I understand and appreciate the concerns raised by the UFU in particular, climate principles will inform the trajectory for practically all future legislation here and beyond.

I agree that farmers and industry should and will be part of the solution. This Bill was forged on the premise of collaboration, which is the basis of all good, solid legislation, and it is that playbook that will instruct how we move forward from here. Engagement with all sectors

should not be a by-product of but an integral cog in the legislative process.

I acknowledge that Northern Ireland has a very different landscape from that of Britain, and agri-food represents a huge slice of our economic pie. However, meat and dairy farmers are already feeling the pinch following a shift in consumption habits, with well-known supermarket chains introducing targets on sustainable produce. They cannot deny that that transition demands new thinking on their part, and that is where the Bill comes in. It is about working with, not against, the agri-food sector in order to ensure that it is supported and to enable it to establish sustainable practices, such as incentivising farmers to sequester more carbon in their land as we move forward together.

Healthy debate means that we hear out different viewpoints. It does not, however, mean that we stand still. We have moved, or we are at least moving, beyond the old-world view that environmental requirements must constrain economic performance and productivity. It is possible to create a better environment and a stronger economy, which is a sentiment that Minister Poots shared recently when he went on record affirming that environmental challenges present economic opportunities.

Climate change will affect all sectors, not just agriculture. The possibilities that enacting climate action legislation can bring should be embraced rather than being seen as something negative. The transport sector has grasped that opportunity and committed to transitioning to an entirely renewable energy fleet by 2050. It is that type of initiative that we need to witness elsewhere. Research has shown that the cost savings of decarbonisation will bear fruit by 2050. As such, going green makes positive economic sense. While the green revolution is regarded with apprehension by some, it is undoubtedly a vehicle for prosperity that we need to get on.

Regardless of economic losses or gains, tackling climate change and hitting net zero carbon targets just need to be done. Delivering real, tangible change requires difficult conversations and difficult decisions. Without courage, there is no progress, and the alternative, which is inaction by the Assembly here and now, does not bear thinking about. Dissenting voices should not be ignored — Mr McAleer outlined how they will not be ignored — but nor can they hinder progress. Wider societal reform is not an ideal but a necessity. We are living in an interconnected climate where an ecological emergency has been driven by human activities. Therefore, ambitious action is critical. How we live our lives is placing pressure on biodiversity. We must learn to do things differently. We must learn to do things better.

Commitment to advance the legislation is a cornerstone of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which has brought us all here today. We cannot back-pedal on that commitment, nor can we afford a piecemeal approach. The time for climate justice is now. The Bill sets in stone a promise to future generations. It is the embodiment of hope that, together, we can make a difference by creating green, sustainable communities that deliver for everyone. Today's promises guarantee tomorrow's reality. We owe it to our children and future generations to honour that promise.

Given the right leadership and supported by the right legislation, we can deliver change in a manner that will

not just help to address the environmental challenges but has the potential to bring about significant economic and societal benefit for all. I support the Bill.

#### 1.45 pm

**Dr Aiken:** I support the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill. I will outline my support for its main provisions, coupled with amendments that our party may seek to append at Committee Stage.

First, this is a personal journey for me. It seems unlikely that somebody who comes from my background as a nuclear submarine captain is an eco-warrior, but I take you back to 1987, which was a long time ago. I was operating under the Arctic ice in areas where there was ice that had not shifted in 1,000 years. However, moving on to 2010, when I was back in the Arctic doing other work, that ice had gone. The 1,000-year ice has disappeared. Furthermore, when in Baffin Island doing some research for the Ministry of Defence — I used to be one of the lead researchers on climate change in the Ministry of Defence, particularly what is happening in the Arctic — I saw at first hand the impact on the tundra and that the permafrost had gone.

Virtually every day now, we see increases in the impact of climate change. When we talk about a climate change emergency, there are very key reasons for that, but there is one piece of information for those who still do not think that this situation is occurring. Part of my job when I was at the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre — that is quite a mouthful — was that I headed up the global strategic trends programme. We helped to fund the Met Office's Hadley Centre, which is designed specifically to research climate change and other areas. That organisation was full of people who were as sceptical as I was to begin with. We have heard many times that no models are predicting our climate well. That is not true. There are models that predicted what is happening right now. When I was due to give evidence at the IPCC and various other places, I was told not to use that evidence because it was so alarmist and that the speed of increases in heat and carbon dioxide emissions meant that we would never be able to reach the global targets that we must meet to prevent a climate catastrophe.

I do not want to be somebody who spends my time going around being a doom merchant. I believe in the future, and I believe in opportunity. However, let us be very clear about this: this climate emergency is happening, and it is happening a lot faster than people think. If we think that, in 2050, we will still be arguing about various parts of agriculture here or, indeed, whether beef will be coming from Brazil, which may, in fact, be a desert by that stage, we need to wake up to the fact that we are in a very, very dangerous situation.

With those provisos, as outlined, the Bill seeks to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of our nation, particularly the provisions of the Climate Change Act 2008 and our national Government's commitment to a 78% carbon reduction target above the 1990s baseline by 2035, with an overall approach of bringing the United Kingdom as a whole to net zero carbon by 2050 at the latest. We have seen that the United States, the EU and our nation are seeking to accelerate carbon reduction targets. COP26 is likely to see an even greater emphasis. However, even if we meet these reduction targets, we



will still struggle to avoid breaching a greater than 1.5°C increase by mid-century. The chances of us meeting that target are very low.

Eighteen of the past 20 years were recorded as the hottest since records began. The degradation of the tundra and across the polar regions and the increasing moves northwards of desertification should be plainly obvious to us all, except those who wilfully ignore the scientific evidence. It is regrettable that, even here in Northern Ireland, at this stage, some choose to ignore the facts of the situation that we now find ourselves in. Northern Ireland and the Assembly have a critical role. The reasoning for the Bill and its substantive 12 clauses is, first and foremost, to recognise that we are in a climate emergency and that we have little time to act. The Northern Ireland Executive and every Department should now take that fact as part of the future Programme for Government, and it should be factored in to all aspects of future outcomes and work strands.

Clauses 2 and 3 set a series of actions on the Executive to deliver and develop sectoral plans and targets. While much of our net carbon reduction can be achieved from the energy, transportation, manufacturing and housing sectors, there remains a considerable amount of comment and concern from sectors of our agriculture industry, as pointed out by the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee.

As a party, our representatives and I have listened to the issues raised by the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association, and the Grain Trade Association, among others. We have also listened intently to the conservation groups, many individual farmers, and, indeed, we have had input from the National Farmers' Union, which, I remind you, now seeks to achieve net zero carbon by 2040. On balance, we understand that the golden objective is to be in line with the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, as set out in the report by Lord Deben, dated 1 April, which outlines proposals for Northern Ireland to achieve at least an 82% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. I emphasise the words "at least".

The Assembly is aware that, elsewhere in our nation, there are moves to accelerate the timing of this target. While the difference between 2045 and 2050 may appear to be slight, it has to be recognised that it has exercised some of our farming community. Therefore, we expect to achieve the bulk of the necessary reductions well before 2045, as our entire nation moves to an electric economy. However, we need to help the farming industry transition as, according to the Ulster Farmers' Union, it intends to. We will propose amendments at Committee Stage to enshrine those reduced targets so that we do not significantly damage the agriculture business sector and allow it to transition effectively.

We seek to amend the date in clause 2(2) to read:

*"2045, and as far as practicable, based on the provisions of the Climate Change Committee report in respect to agriculture, to achieving their targets for 2050."*

The reality is quite clear. The bulk of carbon reductions that we need to achieve has to come from transport, energy, manufacturing and housing, but we cannot get to a situation where we fundamentally damage our

agribusiness while we do that. As a party, we recognise that and are trying to achieve it.

We also seek to see provisions made for the Departments of Agriculture and the Economy, which recently commissioned a study by Sir Peter Kendall on the future shape of the agribusiness sector in Northern Ireland. Most of that is to do with the protocol and how it reshapes itself. However, Peter Kendall talks clearly about the fact that agribusiness needs to be smarter. It is not necessarily about making it smaller, but smarter. If you look at some of the work that he has done for the National Farmers' Union and in other areas, you can see that the Northern Ireland agribusiness sector, which is vital to our economy, has a real opportunity for the future, but we need to embrace it.

The safeguards that we have been talking about, and the examples of democratic accountability that are built into the Bill and laid out in the clauses, allow the Assembly to have the final say in the changes. That is important because, unlike things such as the protocol legislation, which we will have no say in whatsoever, the Assembly will be able to look at the Bill as it comes through, modify any targets that are set and enable the Northern Ireland Executive to set the action plans. It gives us some real democratic accountability.

**Mr McAleer:** Will the Member take an intervention?

**Dr Aiken:** Certainly.

**Mr McAleer:** Does the Member agree that, in addition to the democratic oversight in the Assembly, any carbon action plans produced will come about only after a 16-week public consultation? That is crucial.

**Dr Aiken:** I agree. That demonstrates that another safeguard is being put into the process. It would be good if the Minister had been able to say that he sees the work that the Assembly and the private Member's Bill are doing and takes the opportunity to bring them together. We do no service at all to Northern Ireland, our economy or our environment unless we are seen to be particularly proactive. We have that opportunity to be proactive. I am —.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Dr Aiken:** Yes, Jim.

**Mr Allister:** The Member talks about responding to communities, particularly the agriculture community etc. In clause 11(2), however, the door is slammed shut to all the sectors by virtue of the fact that it states:

*"the Executive Office must not propose any alteration which has the effect, whether directly or indirectly, of lowering any target"*

that is set in the legislation. Is it not, therefore, hyperbole to say that they will listen, when the very legislation that the Members want to take forward slams the door on listening?

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Member for his intervention. As he will be aware, when we guided his Bill through the Assembly, 82 amendments were tabled to it, and amendments made it a much better piece of legislation. We will have the opportunity to look at this Bill as we go forward. When it is brought in front of the Agriculture Committee and debated in the Chamber, we should be able to look at some of those issues quite closely.

I will draw my remarks to a close. It is quite clear that there are a lot of differing views throughout the Assembly on what we are trying to do on climate change. Many Members are quite concerned about climate change and the impact that it will have on the agribusiness sector. Indeed, many have been very strongly lobbied. I respect those Members' views and any particular stance that they may wish to take. I will say this, however: we have an opportunity, as an Assembly, to do something that is not an orange or green issue or that deals with the bickering that we have all the time in the Northern Ireland Executive. We have a real opportunity to do something that is right for everybody in Northern Ireland, not just for now but well into the future. I commend the Bill's Second Stage to the House.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question Time begins at 2:00 pm, so it would be an injustice if Mr John Blair were allowed only two and half minutes before I interrupted him. I therefore suggest that the House take its ease until 2.00 pm. When the debate resumes, the next Member to speak will be, as I said, Mr John Blair.

*The debate stood suspended.*

2.00 pm

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

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Communities

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Before we go to the first question, I advise Members that questions 2 and 3 have been withdrawn. I call Mr William Humphrey.

#### Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service

1. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Communities whether she will match the funding provided by Belfast City Council to the Belfast citywide tribunal service. (AQO 1989/17-22)

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):** I have agreed my Department's final budget allocations, and, as I committed to previously, I have protected the budget for those vital services. There is no reduction in the budget for advice services, including for appeals and tribunal representation. As the Department allocates funding for those services through local government, Belfast City Council is responsible for deciding how it allocates funding for the appeals services, including the Belfast citywide tribunal service. I am investing £6.4 million this year in a wide range of advice, appeals and debt services. There are no additional moneys over and above that amount that could be used to match any increase in funding by Belfast City Council at this time.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I understand that Belfast City Council has agreed to provide £75,000 for this year and £55,000 for the following year, subject to due diligence. Will the Minister commit to supporting, in kind, the monetary value that Belfast City Council wants to provide? Her answer fell short in that regard.

**Ms Hargey:** We have made the allocation to maintain the budget that was there previously. That money goes to Belfast City Council and is ring-fenced for use in advice and representation. I have had no further requests. However, as I said, the budget that we have is the budget that we have got. There is nothing additional, at this point. Of course, if a request is made, I will be happy to look at the issues. The Department is working within a constrained budget — effectively, a cut — but I am glad that we were able to protect that vital funding at this time.

**Mr Sheehan:** Will the Minister give an assurance that funding will continue to be provided to support the important work of tribunal representations?

**Ms Hargey:** I have given a commitment, as was seen in the draft Budget consultation and the full equality impact assessment that I put out. Money was not secured in the overarching Budget, but I have secured it within my internal budget. I have seen the vital role of the advice sector, not only during the pandemic but before it, and in my time as a councillor in Belfast City Council, for example. I want to continue to do all that I can to support the sector and work with it in the time ahead.

**Mr O'Toole:** The Minister will be aware that, last week, the president of Appeal Tribunals, John Duffy, published his report on the standards of decision-making by the Department for Communities in 2017-18. In it, he talks about the:

*“systemic problem with the healthcare professional (HCP) assessment process”,*

particularly in relation to the personal independence payment (PIP) and the employment and support allowance (ESA). Considering John Duffy's representations, what is the Minister doing to simplify the process? For instance, are she and her Department finally considering the requirement, via legislation, of a short GP summary report ahead of initial decisions being made?

**Ms Hargey:** I am looking at the report, and we will be providing a response. The report was taken from the start of the PIP process. Obviously, changes have been made since then, and there will continue to be changes in the process to make sure that it is working as best it can for claimants. We want to announce plans to engage in a more structured way with those claiming the benefits and listen to their views so that we continue to make changes in the time ahead. That is something that I am committing to doing. We will also look at PIP more fundamentally to make sure that it is responding to people's needs.

There are some issues pertaining to parity with Westminster, and there are ongoing discussions with DWP. A Green Paper is being looked at in Westminster, and we are waiting on the outcomes of that coming forward. In the time ahead, I will be making more announcements around this area.

**Ms Armstrong:** Minister, I know that you are committed to the advice sector. In 2016, a Deloitte report confirmed that a new funding model was needed for the Belfast citywide tribunal service. What actions have you taken to move those recommendations forward, ensure that there is not a postcode lottery across Northern Ireland and ensure that those recommendations will be aligned across all council areas?

**Ms Hargey:** Obviously, we work closely with Belfast City Council on taking that work forward. We secure the money for the advice services, and I am glad that we were able to do that this time around. We have continued discussions with the council and, indeed, with the advice sector itself. In the time ahead, we will be looking at what changes can be made to ensure that advice services are available to people, right across the board and across all communities, and how we can remove any particular barriers. We will continue to have those discussions with Belfast City Council and, importantly, with the advice sector.

**Mr Carroll:** It is very disappointing that the Department is not providing match funding for that vital service, which has provided support for tens of thousands of people, including my constituents. Many will ask how things have got this far, why the funding was not included in the budget after implementing welfare reform, why Belfast City Council has to match fund half of it and why the Department cannot fully fund it for next year. Minister, what message does it send to advice workers, citywide and across the North, that you have not done this?

**Ms Hargey:** I have worked very well with the independent advice sector over the last year, particularly through the

COVID pandemic. I have engaged with that sector, as have my officials. We have invested over £6.4 million per annum into budgets for independent advice because we recognise the importance of it. I also encourage councils to look at this issue. I was in Belfast City Council when funding was put into the advice sector. The budget is what it is. It is not a good budget, but the issue is that it was given in a block grant. Effectively, there was a cut by the British Government to the budget here. I have raised concerns about that. I raise it any time I meet a Minister. I met with a Minister from the NIO last Thursday and, again, raised the issue that, when they give a flat budget, in real terms, it means a cut. I also raised the issue that New Decade, New Approach commitments around financing still have not been lived up to and that they need to come forward urgently to address those shortcomings. So I will not be found wanting. That said, in the absence of a budget being allocated, I have protected the money that goes into the advice sector, and I will continue to do that in the time ahead.

## Ards Football Club

4. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the support she will provide to Ards Football Club with its plan to develop a new stadium so that home games can be played in Newtownards. (AQO 1992/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** I thank the Member for his question and, indeed, the email that gave more information on Ards Football Club. I am pleased to see the renewed engagement between Ards Football Club and Ards and North Down Borough Council in their vision for a new stadium that would, once again, give the club a permanent home in the Newtownards community. Unfortunately, with regard to funding to develop club facilities, there are currently no capital grant programmes in my Department or Sport NI to which Ards Football Club can apply. My officials have advised the club to register with Sport NI to receive information on future potential funding programmes that may assist it in realising the ambition to develop the new stadium.

Ards Football Club may benefit from future potential funding through the subregional stadia programme that was set out in New Decade, New Approach. I have asked officials to undertake a review of the programme to satisfy me that proposals are meeting current and future needs.

The refresh and re-engagement review exercise is nearing completion, and the evidence collected, through club surveys, strategic one-to-one discussions with key stakeholders and collaboration with the advisory working group, has informed the shape and scope of the programme. I intend to update Executive colleagues in the coming weeks on the future implementation of the programme, identify potential timelines for delivery and the levels of support available to clubs across the North.

**Mr Harvey:** Thank you very much, Minister, for your answer. As you know, I have been trying to strike up a conversation with you on this proposal. I ask that you meet me and the manager at the proposed site to look at and listen to the vision and to respond with your thoughts on the way forward.

**Ms Hargey:** I am always happy to accept invitations from Members.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Will the Minister clarify whether she is saying that there is no budget for the subregional stadia programme in the current financial year? If that is the case, when does she expect that money to be freed up?

**Ms Hargey:** There is a budget and a commitment of £36.6 million for the subregional stadia programme. The exercise that took place was to make sure that the initial outcomes of that programme still meet the needs today. A refresh and re-engagement review exercise was taken forward with sports organisations, including a survey that my officials are now tidying up, and they will make a proposal to me on the way forward for spending that money. I want to present that to the Executive in the coming weeks in order to get the programme up and running.

**Ms Armstrong:** I declare an interest, because I pay sponsorship money into Ards Football Club for its programmes. Minister, I am disappointed by your answers so far, but I understand the predicament that we are in. Ards Football Club has not had a home for quite some time. You said that the subregional stadia programme money might not actually be money that Ards could apply for, because it has no home at the moment. Have there been any discussions with the Strategic Investment Board about capital expenditure that clubs would be able to apply for?

**Ms Hargey:** Currently, there is no other capital programme. This is across a number of sporting organisations. I have engaged heavily with sporting organisations over the past couple of months. Obviously, they have been impacted by the pandemic. They have played a huge role during the pandemic and will, no doubt, in the recovery. All Members have raised questions for oral and written answer over the past year on the importance of sports more generally, and I completely recognise that.

The money that we have at the moment is for the subregional stadia programme. I also recognise, and have said previously, that that may not be enough to meet the demand. Most certainly, it will not be enough. Obviously, I will have to keep discussions ongoing with the Executive. It will be dependent on the Budget and what is available and will be measured against other pressures in Health and Education more broadly. If there is a need for a capital increase, I will make those representations and requests to the Executive.

I have not had direct engagement with the Strategic Investment Board, but that is certainly something that I could do. I am keen at some point to look at a small capital programme for sports organisations, recognising that not all fit into the subregional stadia programme. A lot of work goes on, particularly at the grass roots. We have no budget for that, but, again, I am keen to engage with the Executive to see whether we can find a budget to bring forward programmes. There is no doubt that there is a huge need and demand in the community, and that is something that I want to continue to engage on.

### PIP Appeal Hearings: North Antrim

5. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Communities how many people in North Antrim are awaiting a personal independence payment (PIP) appeal hearing. (AQO 1993/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** My Department does not hold record information based on constituency. However, the details of the number of personal independence payment appeals, pending per town in North Antrim, as of 31 March this year are: Ballymena 310 and Ballymoney 98, making a total of 408 people in the North Antrim area who are waiting on an appeal hearing.

**Mr Frew:** Thank you, Minister, for your answer to my question. To get some sort of comparison and context for those figures, will you supply numbers for previous years?

**Ms Hargey:** I do not have those at hand but I can write to you formally, Paul, with an update on previous years.

**Ms Kimmins:** Minister, you will be aware of the importance of ensuring that those going through the appeals process are not suffering financially. Will you therefore outline what steps you are taking to ensure that that is not the case?

### 2.15 pm

**Ms Hargey:** Mitigation payments continue for appellants who are awaiting the outcome of an appeal, for cases where the initial claim was for disability living allowance (DLA) and for those who are transitioning to PIP. My Department has advised appellants who experience financial hardship that they should make contact with their local office as soon as possible and should engage with the independent advice sector.

We want to address the backlog of hearings. Part of that was caused by having to suspend face-to-face hearings because of coronavirus. We have been transitioning, and we have been rolling out pilots for telephone assessments as well as looking at carrying out assessments virtually. Again, though, it is down to what the claimant wants, and we know that the majority still prefer face-to-face assessments. As easements to regulations come in, we are working with the appeals service on how we can start to safely reopen face-to-face services and deal with the backlog as soon as possible.

**Mr Allister:** The figure of 310 from Ballymena is particularly disappointing, although it does not surprise me. My office has an appeal next week that has been waiting 14 months. Will the Minister supply the average waiting time for an appeal in North Antrim? That certainly seems to be something that needs to be taken under control. The return of face-to-face services would be a major step forward.

**Ms Hargey:** I do not have the exact waiting time, but I can furnish you with that in a written response. I know that the caseload from 31 March this year was 8,639. As of the same period, 6,067 live PIP appeals are in the system. That makes up 71% of the overall caseload. As I said, a big part of that was caused by appeals completely shutting down during the pandemic that started in March last year. The appeals service extended that at the start of this year after the new restrictions came in over Christmas. There is no doubt that that led to unacceptable levels of appeals.

Officials are now working with the service and the advice sector to look at how we can have a safe reopening and increase capacity to deal with those levels as soon as possible. As I said, my officials have also been rolling out pilots for telephone and virtual assessments while recognising that the majority of people still prefer face-to-face assessments and that, if that is what they prefer, we

will have to deal with it. I am hopeful that, with the easing of more restrictions, with those pilots and with jobs and benefits offices and other services beginning to open again as a result of the easing, we can start to deal with that and get people through the process as quickly as possible. I will furnish you with an answer to the specifics of your question in a written response.

**Mr Durkan:** The number of appeals and, more so, the number of successful appeals are clear evidence that the system is not working. Many parties, including the Minister's, have been correctly scathing about Capita's performance. Will the Minister inform the House whether she will extend Capita's contract? How might that look, and how much might it cost?

**Ms Hargey:** Those issues are being looked at. I recognise the issues with the assessment. I also recognise the public opinion on some of the issues. I have indicated that my policy position is to move towards an in-house model, and I indicated what that would look like. Previously, the in-house model involved working with local GPs, and difficulties were presented with that. We are also looking at the Scottish model, where they work with health trusts, and we have had engagements with the Health Minister, but, again, changes have to be made there. For example, the system on which people are recorded is different depending on the health trust. There is no one database the way there is in England. We found that to be an issue with the food distribution service, where there was no single database. I know that it will take a bit of time for the Department of Health to put that in place, but I am keen that a policy be adopted where we move to an in-house service. We are trying to work out the timelines for that. Once I have made a decision about that and about what the timescales will look like, I will certainly update the House and the Committee.

### Universal Credit: Legacy Claimants

6. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the process of moving legacy benefit claimants to universal credit (UC). (AQO 1994/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Thank you. People who remain in receipt of legacy benefits and credits will be moved to universal credit in the next phase of the roll-out known as "Move to UC". Prior to COVID-19, my Department notified stakeholders here that the planned commencement date for Move to UC would not be before January 2021, with an estimated completion date of September 2024. Planning for Move to UC was temporarily paused to allow my Department to focus all available resources on responding to the COVID pandemic, and, as the Member will know, the number of people who need universal credit here has more than doubled since then. We had to respond to make sure that people were paid. A date for the commencement of Move to UC here has not been confirmed. I have asked my officials for an assessment of the optimal timing for the Move to UC process to recommence here and will bring forward proposals for doing so at the earliest possible opportunity. Stakeholders will be updated when plans are more certain.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister will be aware that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions recently announced that the process for moving legacy benefit claimants on to universal credit

would be completed by 2024. Can the Minister confirm whether that is the timeline that her Department will work to in the coming months? Will she engage further with the independent advice sector to enable it to support claimants who will need help transferring to or not to universal credit in the coming years?

**Ms Hargey:** As I said, there was a pause in the move, and that may disrupt the timetable and that final date. My officials are working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions in Britain on that timescale. That is why I have asked for an assessment of recommencing the process and of how long that will then take. That will be for ministerial approval going forward. Once I have that assessment, I will decide when it is likely that we can commence that work. Of course, that will be done by engaging stakeholders and looking at the implications. This will be a huge change for thousands and thousands of people, and having independent advice for people as they are transitioning will be key in making sure that the capacity is there. We will do that by engaging with the sector, and, after that, I will make my decision and notify the House.

**Ms Anderson:** Minister, can you give an assurance to my constituents in Derry and others across the North that those who are being transferred from legacy benefits to universal credit will have a transitional protection? What would that transitional protection be?

**Ms Hargey:** We are looking at transitional protections for people who are moving over. Some people will be financially better off with a move to universal credit. We want to work with those people in the time ahead and look at the implications as part of that transitional period. We are looking at that as part of the transitional assessment that I have asked officials to look at. Once I have that assessment, I will update the House. I can also correspond with the Member directly.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Member is not in her place for the next question, so I call Christopher Stalford.

### Casement Park: Consultation with Residents' Groups

8. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister for Communities to outline what consultation she has had with the residents' groups adjacent to Casement Park, in particular the Mooreland and Owenvarragh Residents' Association. (AQO 1996/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Through the regional stadia programme, my Department has grant funded the three sporting codes to deliver their respective stadia. Community engagement is an important element of the delivery. In anticipation of planning approval, Ulster GAA is finalising detailed proposals for fresh engagement with the community. The GAA is clear on the importance of being a good neighbour to the community around Casement Park and more broadly, and I have regular engagement with the Ulster Council GAA project team, which is involved in the stadium development, on the fundamental element of the project.

**Mr Stalford:** I did not anticipate being called for question 8, so I congratulate the Minister on her brevity in getting this far down the list. That said, the Minister has failed to answer my question. I asked her what engagement she or

her Department had had with residents in the area on the development proposal. Does she agree that it is important that residents' views on the matter are taken on board?

**Ms Hargey:** Thank you. The overall project is owned by Ulster Council GAA, and I have been encouraging the GAA to engage. That said, planning approval is not yet complete, and we need to watch the type of engagement that we have until we know that full planning approval has been granted. I have engaged with the GAA through the programme board that has been established to look at the redevelopment of Casement Park. From my background in community development, I have said that it needs to engage proactively. It has an engagement strategy for when planning has been approved.

I have had no direct engagement with the residents' group, neither those who oppose it nor those who support it. I am waiting for planning permission to be approved, because I do not want to do anything that might have an impact on that consideration. There will be comprehensive engagement. I have pushed the GAA to have that and to work with Belfast City Council and the Department to look at the wider issues and opportunities that the redevelopment can bring. The Member knows what the development of Windsor Park has done for the community in his constituency.

**Ms Flynn:** What is the Minister's assessment of the benefits that the Casement Park development will bring to the wider community of west Belfast and, more broadly, to Gaelic games and culture?

**Ms Hargey:** If you go to Casement Park, you will see the state that it is in at the moment. As a past camogie player, I know that there is a huge aspiration and demand to see Casement Park revitalised and redeveloped. The scale of the infrastructure will have an immediate impact on construction jobs. It is one of the biggest infrastructure projects that the Executive will take forward in this mandate, once the approval is signed off, in the number of jobs that will come directly from it.

There is the redevelopment of the wider Andersonstown area. If you look at the Falls Road from the bottom right up, you see that there have been huge developments over the last 10 years in the west of the city. Casement Park will be one of the signature projects on the frontage of that road. I have been working with the GAA, and we want to see a wider community impact not just for the Gaels to play in a stadium but for how this pitch and its facilities can be used by other sports organisations and the wider community. There will be huge economic, social, cultural and sporting benefits for the community. We have seen those benefits with the other two stadia that have been developed in the partnering and outreach work that they have done with local sports organisations in growing their sport, particularly for women and people with disabilities. I hope that the redevelopment of Casement Park will bring good opportunities, just as the other stadia have done.

**Mr O'Toole:** Casement will be a huge benefit not just for Ulster Gaels or for Antrim GAA. It is hugely overdue and will be welcome when, hopefully, it is built. However, the potential is much wider than that. It could be global. At the minute, there are plans for a joint British-Irish World Cup bid for 2030. The truth is that Casement Park will probably be the only stadium in Northern Ireland capable of hosting World Cup games. Minister, what representations are

you making with the Irish Football Association (IFA), the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) and the FA in London in order to place Casement Park at the centre of that potential World Cup bid, which could bring World Cup football to Belfast?

**Ms Hargey:** Thank you for your question. You are right: Casement Park is the stadium that would advance that competition bid. The Minister for the Economy takes the lead on the engagement with London, but, in my capacity as sports Minister, I have engaged proactively with our officials and with the Minister for the Economy to outline the potential of facilities such as Casement as part of that bid. We will keep that engagement going, but it is primarily the Minister for the Economy who represents the Executive in applying for the games.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** We will probably have time just for the Minister's answer, without the supplementary.

### Subregional Stadia Programme for Soccer: Funding

9. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the allocation of funding for the subregional stadia programme for soccer. (AQO 1997/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The Member will be aware that the subregional stadia programme for soccer is a priority in 'New Decade, New Approach', and I have consistently confirmed my commitment to it. The programme provides a real opportunity to deliver a wider range of government priorities and to address social, economic and cultural needs. I have asked my officials to undertake a review of the programme to satisfy me that the proposals look not just at the current needs but at the future needs.

### 2.30 pm

As I said in response to question 4, the refresh and re-engagement exercise is nearing completion. I hope to have that presented to me, and then, in the coming weeks, I want to make a presentation to the Executive for sign-off in order to allow the programme to go forward. Departmental officials have also worked with experts on an advisory group comprising key stakeholders from the Chief Leisure Officers Association (CLOA), the IFA, the NI Football League (NIFL), Sport NI and my Department. That has ensured a collaborative approach to developing the shape and scope of the programme.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

### Changing Places

T1. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Communities to outline a timeline for when she will create a fund to encourage the creation of changing places — state-of-the-art facilities for those who have severe disabilities — in buildings across Northern Ireland. (AQT 1271/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Since 2018-19, my Department has been working in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, local councils and the Public Health Agency (PHA) on access to changing facilities. A total of 12 new changing place facilities, at a

range of locations across the North, have been supported through the programme. My Department is leading on the development of the Executive's disability strategy. As part of that strategy, we have developed a co-design approach with the sector, including for changing place provision. We are working with the Department of Finance to consider how the issues will be reflected in the new strategy and to determine the funding that will be made available. Subject to that, after consultation, I will present the full disability strategy to the Executive in December.

**Mr Chambers:** I thank the Minister for her answer. England has created a similar fund of £30 million. Can the Minister commit to a proportionate level of funding in Northern Ireland?

**Ms Hargey:** There are ongoing discussions about finance and what it will mean in the time ahead. Once that has been confirmed, I will update Members.

### Poverty Alleviation: Ministerial Plans

T2. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Communities what she plans to do differently to tackle the shocking levels of poverty, given that she will be aware that recent figures highlighted the fact that 400,000 people across Northern Ireland are living in poverty, with 27% of those people residing in the Londonderry and Strabane council area in his constituency. (AQT 1272/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The poverty figures are well known. They have been highlighted, and everybody has seen that they have been exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. As part of New Decade, New Approach, I had responsibility for taking forward an anti-poverty strategy, which includes child poverty. We established an expert panel, which published its report in March. We have now established a co-design group that is working with community organisations and experts involved in the fields of child poverty and poverty more broadly. We have also established a cross-departmental working group, because it is recognised that the issue of poverty does not rest just with my Department but spans Departments. I know that, last week, the Health Committee looked at a report on health inequalities that showed that the numbers have got worse rather than better.

We are working across government to look at what comes out of the co-design approach, at how the strategy will be funded and at how Departments can take a lead on certain aspects. The strategy will then go out to public consultation. I hope that the timeline will be for me to present the strategy, along with the other inclusion strategies, for sign-off and approval in December. There is other work ongoing. I have papers in on welfare mitigations and other protections. There is also the whole housing transformation that we are trying to do, as we recognise that housing plays a fundamental role. We are looking at areas such as Foyle, where there are high levels of people in housing need. I want to introduce ring-fenced funding to start to address the housing crisis in Foyle, north and west Belfast and other areas.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for her response. The Minister will also be aware that there are particular challenges in our rural communities. I have heard time and time again about the difference in funding available for some of the more urban communities and that available for rural communities. Will the Minister commit to addressing

and putting a focus on how we bring rural communities up to par with many of our urban villages?

**Ms Hargey:** It is an important point. I want to make sure that we are rural-proofing our policies and our spend. That will ultimately mean a change in spend and how money is allocated, for example through councils and other mechanisms. I am committed to looking at all those issues. I have also written about regeneration functions. Primarily, in the Department, mine is focused on urban settings. Many Members have written to me recently about rural settings.

I have engaged with the AERA Minister and the Infrastructure Minister to get a joined-up approach to rural issues and rural inequality. That has been positive. We provided some funding during the pandemic to respond to the needs of the rural community. We will bring forward that engagement soon. I have asked for a meeting with them. We will assess rural proofing and, hopefully, we can make a joint announcement between the three Ministries on making a change in those areas. As part of the housing programme, looking, again, at specific rural needs, we met community organisations in rural areas where those issues have been consistently raised. Working with the other Ministries, we want to bring forward proposals for changes to address the issues.

### Social Housing

T3. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for Communities to set out her commitment to and plans for increasing social housing. (AQT 1273/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** That has been raised regularly. When Carál Ní Chuilín was in the ministerial position last November, she made a statement setting out the trajectory on what we need to do on housing in the time ahead. There are huge changes relating to revitalising the Housing Executive, such as ensuring that it deals with its historic debt issues, looking at the £7 billion deficit that it needs in order to maintain its current stock, and freeing it up to allow it to build again. We have established a programme board with the Housing Executive and the Strategic Investment Board to look at models and options. I want to do that while retaining the current set-up of the Housing Executive. We are looking at that at the moment.

We had a good result on corporation tax. Over the last six years, the Housing Executive paid over £56 million in corporation tax. We have been exempted from that and are trying to claw some of the money back and to deal with historic debt. We will soon consult on a housing supply strategy. We will look at supply, right to buy, and ring fencing. We will also look at an exercise to identify surplus land and will work with local councils so that they can identify public land in their areas in order to address housing. We are starting to work with the Housing Executive to look at towns and city centres, for example, the Living over the Shop scheme. Are there things that we can do? We will even look at buying back homes to reintroduce them to the public housing market.

I am glad that we have seen an increase of £26 million in the housing budget this year. This year's budget is £162 million. Also in 2020-21, we had the first increase of its kind for a decade in new social homes started: we had 2,403 homes. I want to ensure that we can build

the capacity and have the finance to look at increasing housing development over the next period.

**Mr McHugh:** Thank you for your answer, Minister. You and your Department are to be congratulated on the objectives that have been achieved to date for the completion of new social housing and on the fact that you have exceeded targets for commencement and completion. What steps are you taking to ensure that that trajectory continues?

**Ms Hargey:** We have set up programme boards to bring forward proposed models on the way forward to deal with some of the historic debt issues and the finances of the Housing Executive.

All of this work will culminate in a proposal, with timescales and finance attached, that I will present to the Executive before the end of this mandate for sign-off and approval. As I said, I am also moving forward with engagements and consultations about a supply strategy for the North, and I am looking to introduce things such as ring-fencing, which will be done in this mandate. However, the longer-term challenges will be presented in a comprehensive report to the Executive before the end of this mandate, and work is well under way to develop that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** As the Member is not in his place for Question 4, we will move on. I call Órlaithí Flynn for her question.

### Private Rented Sector: Safety Measures

T5. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for Communities to outline her plans to legislate to ensure that people and families living in the private rented sector have a safe and secure home. (AQT 1275/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Yes. I will be bringing forward legislation. A proposal for the first strand of legislation to build in extra protections for those living in the private rented sector is currently with the Executive. When you look at the revitalisation of housing and what needs to be done on that, you see that there are more children and families now living in the private rented sector than in the social sector. The conditions and the safety standards for those people is a huge area, so part of the legislation will look at health and safety in homes and issues such as electrical checks and the installation of carbon monoxide alarms.

We are drafting other legislation concerning the private rented sector in order to deal with issues such as letting agents and having a longer-term review. However, there are consultations and engagements that need to happen around those other areas of work, particularly around enhancing the role of councils in enforcement. I hope that the Executive will soon sign off on the introduction of a draft Bill, the first part of that legislation. Then, we will work on and draft supplementary legislation before the end of this mandate.

**Ms Flynn:** Minister, you have partly answered my supplementary question. First, I am delighted to hear that legislation is being prepared and will be progressed, because we know how many families are living in substandard housing accommodation. It is not fair; it is not right. Can you elaborate on the timeline for that legislation's progression?

**Ms Hargey:** I want the first part of the legislation to be completed by the end of this mandate. I have engaged with

the Committee for Communities and highlighted a number of pieces of legislation that I want to bring forward by the end of this mandate. I will go through the normal process of introducing legislation in the Assembly, and it will go to the Committee for consideration. I am hopeful that we will have that legislation in place by the end of this mandate. That is the timeline that I am working to in order to bring in that protection for residents in the private rented sector.

### Lottery-type Fundraising: Legislative Changes

T6. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Communities to detail how organisations such as charities, voluntary groups and sports clubs will benefit from the changes to legislation governing lotteries. (AQT 1276/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Yes. I was glad to change the legislation to allow those organisations to sell lottery tickets online for fundraising activities. This primarily came from a request from NICVA, from the sector itself, which asked us to look at this and to look at more flexibility that could be built in, because of the impact that the pandemic has had on the ability of charities and others to fundraise. I am delighted that we have been able to make this change and that those organisations will be able to fundraise through ticketing and lottery schemes. It lifts the block, and it is something that the sector wanted.

**Ms Kimmins:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I think that it is important to welcome the Minister's commitment to addressing this issue as it does open vital funding streams for many organisations, particularly as we come out of the current pandemic. Can she provide an update on any other supports that are available to help community, cultural and sporting organisations through this pandemic?

**Ms Hargey:** Overall, the Department has invested over £306 million as part of the COVID moneys over the last year. A large part of that went to food support and community support programmes that run through councils. We have been working collaboratively with councils, which, ultimately, work with community organisations at the grassroots level.

### 2.45 pm

I stood up a community emergencies leadership group, which involved grassroots and strategic organisations that have helped us to craft our response to the COVID pandemic and also to look at the recovery. Just over two weeks ago, I met that group to look at social recovery. Obviously, at present, we are bidding for COVID money with regard to restrictions being eased. I want to continue to try to support the sports sector, the charity sector, community development organisations and the culture, arts and heritage sector. I have made bids for COVID money to try to look at that in the time ahead. One area that we have secured in the budget is the £9 million for homelessness services. Particularly as restrictions begin to ease, that may actually bring issues such as homelessness to light. We want to ensure that we work with the sector and have the resources in place to do that. I will continue to engage as we move forward.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Time is up for topical questions. I ask Members to take their ease before the next item of business.



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

## Economy

### University and College Union: Ministerial Meetings

1. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy why she has not met the University and College Union (UCU) since assuming office. (AQO 2004/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** I thank the Member for his question. In June 2020, the University and College Union requested a meeting with me regarding the further education advisory and oversight group that I established to look at the reopening of colleges. I was unable to fulfil that request due to diary commitments. Following the commencement of pay negotiations, further meetings have been requested with regard to those negotiations. It would not be appropriate for me to meet the UCU in those circumstances, as those negotiations are between the employers — the colleges — and the trade union side. I hope that we can find a resolution to the current situation. Students and lecturers have had an extremely difficult time over the past year. In order to make a recovery, we need to focus on skills and the economy. We need everyone to work together to do that.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Minister for her answer. However, I and many workers in the UCU find it frankly insulting and offensive that she refused to meet them and their reps directly. At any time, and at any level, that is unacceptable, but especially in the middle of a pandemic, when workers have worked throughout it while in dispute with their employers. Currently, in further education, they are taking strike action. Not only has the Minister refused to meet unions and workers' representatives, but she and her officials have met employers during the same period — one side in the dispute.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Can the Member come to his question, please?

**Mr Carroll:** How can those workers and UCU members have any faith in the Minister's being objective and impartial if she meets only one side and refuses to meet the other?

**Mrs Dodds:** I refer the Member to my previous answer. It is inappropriate for me to meet the union at this particular stage. I and the Department will have to act with a degree of objectivity on the outcome of those negotiations and the business case that will be brought forward following them. I urge both sides to redouble their efforts to bring the process to a conclusion. I have notified the Finance Minister and the Department of Finance that there will be a need for additional funding following the conclusion of the negotiations. It is in everybody's interests — lecturers and students — to bring the situation to a speedy conclusion. I wish them well in doing that, and I will do my best to work for that end once the negotiations have come to a conclusion.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Minister for her answers. I accept to a point that it is not the role of the Minister to negotiate in industrial disputes, but a meeting with the Minister, whether it is with the employer side or the trade union side, can bring a certain atmosphere to negotiations that allows them to be successful. Will the Minister reconsider

her decision to not meet the UCU? I also urge her to reconsider her decision to not meet the students' unions, which are also an important voice in our further and higher education lobby.

**Mrs Dodds:** I can only refer the Member to my previous answer. It is important that we are objective in our role, that we fulfil that role, which is a legal responsibility, to the full and that the employers, that is, the further education colleges, and the unions are able to make an appropriate agreement. If that happens, I will not be found wanting in trying to resolve the outstanding issues.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. Given the flexibility of Zoom, will you commit today to meeting representatives of the students' unions so that they can discuss their situation with COVID supports?

**Mrs Dodds:** As the Member knows, I do many, many Zoom meetings in a day. Those meetings can be very hectic and take place back to back. I have met the students' representatives — I will meet them again in due course — and I know that students have been through a difficult time over the past year. That is why I have moved to provide the supports that we have available, and the most generous support package in the whole of the United Kingdom is for students in Northern Ireland.

### ExcludedNI: Ministerial Engagement

2. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on whether she has engaged with ExcludedNI. (AQO 2005/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for his question. I met representatives of ExcludedNI in September, along with Stewart Dickson. Since then, my officials have continued to engage with them and with other organisations as we have developed the COVID-19 supports that local businesses have found invaluable. I will continue to engage with a diverse range of representative organisations as we focus on economic recovery through the economic recovery action plan.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call Stewart Dickson. Sorry, I call Mike Nesbitt for a supplementary. Apologies.

**Mr Nesbitt:** How very dare you. [Laughter.] I thank the Minister for the answer. ExcludedNI would be interested to know, with regard to the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS) part B, when her Department intends to release payments for the period beginning 31 March.

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department has continued to release payments through all the schemes. Indeed, only recently, we sought Executive agreement to extend part B of the scheme that the Member referred to so that people could avail themselves of it right up until 23 May, which is when we hope to see a lifting of many of the restrictions that hold businesses back.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you for your answers, Minister, and thank you, Mr Nesbitt, for tabling the question. Minister, you met ExcludedNI. Since that time, sterling work has been done in the background between it and many of the organisations and schemes that you have been working with and through. Do you have further plans to support the events and wedding industry in Northern Ireland as we emerge from the COVID pandemic? How will they fit into your recovery plans?

**Mrs Dodds:** The Member rightly identifies some of the core issues. In Northern Ireland, we have identified and plugged gaps of support that have not been plugged in the rest of the United Kingdom. For example, the limited company directors support scheme has paid out £10.1 million to date. That invaluable scheme filled a recognised gap in the support that we had put together.

With events, weddings and so on, it is clear that the best way to support all those aspects of our economy is to have our economy open, functioning and operating normally. I look forward to 24 May, when I hope that we will see another step change in that reopening and recovery. That is where people want to be, and that is where we must support sectors of the economy.

**Ms Dolan:** The stringent criteria applied by your Department for the recent self-employed scheme excluded those who became self-employed after March 2020. In light of the £2.5 million underspend in this scheme, will you now consider widening the criteria so that more newly self-employed people can receive support?

**Mrs Dodds:** The Member will acknowledge that we looked at the newly self-employed support scheme a number of times and widened and extended the criteria so that the scheme included a wider range of people. We now have around 3,009 applications to that scheme. The 2,481 that have been paid total £8.7 million. That has been an invaluable support to those who were newly self-employed and who missed out on aspects of the core COVID recovery schemes.

As I said to Mr Dickson, the focus now should be for my Department and, indeed, for the House more generally to get the recovery up and running as fast as we can. Today, almost 100,000 people still rely on the furlough scheme for wages in Northern Ireland, and we can reduce that number and stave off a spike in unemployment only if we get the economy open.

**Mr Catney:** How many businesses have had their applications to part A and part B of the COVID restrictions business support scheme rejected?

**Mrs Dodds:** I can write to the Member with the precise figure, but, up to now, we have paid out £83.3 million. Part A has included over 6,000 applications. Some 5,086 of those have been paid. Some have been rejected, and, for some, we are awaiting additional information. I will write to the Member with the specific figure.

For part B, 2,387 applications have been submitted, and 1,551 have been paid. The same reasons apply to those not paid: a lack of information or ineligibility under the criteria.

I commend the staff at Invest NI, who have generally responded very efficiently to queries from Members and the general public. The funding that they have administered and put into the economy through grants stands at around £120 million.

**3.00 pm**

### Economic Recovery Action Plan: Update

**3. Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the economic recovery action plan. (AQO 2006/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask for your indulgence in allowing me an additional minute to answer the question; it is fundamentally important as we go forward. I thank my colleague for his question. Since I launched my economic recovery action plan on 25 February, I have been successful in securing an additional £286.8 million in 2021-22 to deliver it. On 21 April, my Department hosted a virtual stakeholder event to continue the discussion on recovery. Partnership and collaboration are key to the successful delivery of the actions that are set out in the plan. On 30 April, I announced further details of the high street stimulus scheme and the holiday at home voucher scheme. Both those schemes are cornerstones of the plan. The timing of their delivery will help to maintain the recovery momentum that has started with the reopening of businesses across Northern Ireland.

On the green economy agenda, I have published the options consultation on a new energy strategy. That includes progressing key actions relating to renewable energy, energy efficiency, the hydrogen economy and green innovation. On the skills agenda, pilot activity has commenced to test how the flexible skills fund could be utilised to support upskilling. The development of additional upskilling and reskilling interventions is also under way. That is particularly important when we consider the number of people who are still on furlough or still have their employment supported through the self-employed scheme.

I will continue to work hard to deliver the themes that are set out in the plan. It is worth indicating to the House that an additional £31 million has been allocated to skills, education and support, and an additional £10 million has been allocated for university research and development. There is £145 million for the high street stimulus scheme; £2 million for the holiday at home voucher scheme; £20 million for advertising and marketing for tourism and hospitality; and £17 million for tourism support programmes. There is an additional £15 million to maximise Invest NI's external growth opportunities; an additional £1 million for cross-border programmes; an additional £6 million to support air connectivity; and an additional £3 million for innovation and digital innovation. An additional £3.5 million will be available for entrepreneurship, including support for SMEs.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the additional time.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for that detailed update and for taking the time to visit Londonderry Chamber of Commerce very recently. A key element of the Minister's economic recovery plan is the high street voucher scheme. Will she provide a bit more detail about that scheme, which we hope will provide a stimulus to our high streets?

**Mrs Dodds:** Yes. It was good to visit the city. We had a lovely day and saw some really innovative plans to take the city forward, including innovation at Catalyst and the new environmental scheme down on the lough shores. I was really encouraged.

As I indicated, £145 million has been guaranteed for the high street stimulus scheme. We are now proceeding with the procurement and implementation of that scheme. We have also undertaken research that will give us an evidence base for the best time to roll out that scheme. It appears that, in order to encourage spending after the summer months and the initial pent-up demand that

we see in the shops now, the end of the summer or the beginning of autumn is the best time to roll that out. It will be a prepaid card worth £100, and every adult over 18 will be eligible to apply. The only stipulation is that it must be used in bricks-and-mortar businesses in Northern Ireland, not online. It is what it says in its title: it is about stimulating business on the high street and supporting the retail sector, which has suffered enormously during the COVID pandemic.

**Dr Archibald:** I also want to ask about the high street voucher scheme, because half of the funding for economic recovery is going towards that scheme. We heard about it from officials at last week's Economy Committee meeting, but they were not able to confirm what the voucher could be spent on, where it could be spent or what its economic impact would be. Given what you have said, Minister, about the timescale for delivering it — at the end of the summer, hopefully — are you confident that it will be ready to be rolled out at that time?

**Mrs Dodds:** Work is already well-advanced on procurement of the provider for the cards. I hope that we will be able to deliver the scheme at the end of the summer or the beginning of autumn. Furthermore, I want to have time over the summer to work with local chambers, towns and businesses, because we want the scheme to support local high streets. It is not about the online shops but about the bricks-and-mortar high street. It is about people from our communities who have invested in their businesses and who, last year, were probably closed longer than they were open. We will be sending out a very strong "shop local" message with the high street voucher scheme. We will be working extensively with groups of people, even those who are hard to reach and who may find it difficult to access the scheme, in order to ensure that it is open and available to everyone.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I want to touch on the high street voucher scheme as well. There are many variables involved. Has your Department done an impact assessment of how the scheme is going to benefit the overall economy? How will we recognise whether it has been a success or a failure? I do not suspect that it will be a failure, but how we do measure its success? If your Department has done such an assessment, will you publish it?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** There are a number of questions in there.

**Mrs Dodds:** The scheme has clearly caught the imagination of not only people in Northern Ireland but a wide variety of people in Scotland and elsewhere, who have approached me about it. We have completed a business case for the scheme, and we will then carry out an impact assessment. Where similar schemes have been rolled out, however, it is absolutely clear from the data that they have increased spend on the high street. We must remember that, by the end of August and the beginning of September, we will see the end of the furlough scheme, at which stage there will potentially be greater difficulties for the economy. We want to continue to stimulate the high street throughout the autumn and into Christmas. We hope that there will be a multiplier effect from the scheme so that, if they get £100, people will purchase items that cost more than that, and we also hope that the scheme will encourage them to continue to support local shops and businesses in local towns.

## Centenary of Northern Ireland

**4. Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on plans to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland. (AQO 2007/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for her question, which is timely and very important. As we mark the centenary of Northern Ireland, the Department will use it as a time to reflect on our past successes as a small country, where we led the world in shipbuilding, rope-works and linen production, and look at where we are now. We are global leaders in cybersecurity, tech start-ups and fintech and have a creative industries sector that produces TV programmes and films that are broadcast across the world.

The qualities that marked our industrial endeavour in the past — innovation, determination and vision — are still very much evident today, and we have seen that in abundance over the past year, as businesses pivot, repurpose production lines or step up to provide much-needed materials as part of our response to the challenges of the pandemic.

This has been a difficult year for Northern Ireland, and the centenary gives us an ideal platform on which to showcase everything that is great about Northern Ireland and why it is a great place in which to live, work and invest. It can also act as a springboard for economic recovery.

Despite the ongoing restrictions in some parts of the globe, we have an ambitious series of events scheduled, including an international investment conference here at the beginning of next year. Invest NI, Tourism Ireland and NI Screen all have a series of events to mark the centenary and give us standout from other regions.

As we build our second century, I look forward to working with stakeholders from across Northern Ireland to help to shape our future economy and create a place that is attractive to investors, is recognised globally, and creates opportunities at home for people from all backgrounds and communities across Northern Ireland.

**Miss McIlveen:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she confirm whether any bids were made for funding to mark the centenary? Will she outline what her priorities are for Northern Ireland as we build for its second century?

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department made bids to the Department of Finance as part of the NDNA process. We have not heard from the Department of Finance about those bids. However, we have identified funds in the Department that we will use, along with those from the Northern Ireland Office, to fund the investment conference and the work that we will do to showcase Northern Ireland. As we celebrate Northern Ireland's centenary and move into its second century, I want the economy to be one of innovation and inclusion, and, as I said in my first answer, I want this to be a place where people feel at home and feel that they can have a prosperous and settled life.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister said that bids had been made. A couple of weeks ago, the Finance Minister told me in the House that he could recall no bids from any Department to mark the centenary, so can the Minister elaborate on what bids were made and to what extent and, indeed, what funds have been set aside in her Department to mark the centenary?

Does she agree that it is beyond shameful that, here in the seat of government, there will not be so much as a rose bush to mark the centenary, such is the bigotry of Sinn Féin?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Member has asked the Minister a question.

**Mrs Dodds:** On the last part of your question, I think that the coverage that I read in the papers over the weekend was petty and, indeed, not worthy of people who claim that they want an agreed Ireland for everyone to live in. It appears that it is only for certain folks who conform to what is required. If we are to make this place home, we need to make it a place where we can all live, work and express our identity.

I have made bids to the Minister. They were part of the NDNA process, and there was a series of bids in relation to NDNA. I have identified funding in my Department that I will use, alongside funding that we have secured from the Northern Ireland Office, for the investment conference, which is hugely important as we take the Northern Ireland economy forward.

I have been working with the Northern Ireland Office to increase Northern Ireland's footprint globally. We have secured more funding, which brings it up to about £8 million, to have Northern Ireland represented in growing economies across the world so that we can make the connections that help us to develop the economy. Our arm's-length bodies in Invest NI and NI Screen also have a series of events coming up. Of course, one of the important things that I want to revitalise is Northern Ireland's ambassador programme across the world. Many of the people who come here to invest do so because they have a personal connection or know someone with a personal connection. Therefore we want to utilise the ambassador programme right across the world. I look forward to rolling those out.

Of course, everyone in the House will recognise that, —

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

**Mrs Dodds:** Sorry; just one second.

— with COVID and the restrictions, that that has been difficult in a difficult year.

### 3.15 pm

**Mr O'Toole:** We will not agree on the exact nature of what we are commemorating and celebrating with the centenary, but, going forward, I certainly want to see maximum investment and maximum opportunity in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister, therefore, agree, given that she has talked about an investment conference, that the best way to celebrate the duality and unique nature of this place is to highlight, at that investment conference, our access to both the UK and EU markets of half a billion people via the Northern Ireland protocol? Will she commit —?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Member has asked his question.

**Mr O'Toole:** Will she commit to instructing Invest NI to maximise that opportunity?

**Mrs Dodds:** We may not agree on the centenary of Northern Ireland, but I think that we should and can all

agree that we want a place that is prosperous for all our people. We are already working on some elements of the investment conference that we are going to do at the start of the year, and there is a little taster of one that we will do in London at the end of this year. That is really important. The Member must realise that investors come to Northern Ireland for a very wide range of reasons, and that includes the skills of our people, the cost base in Northern Ireland, the standard of living and the standard of education. It is for all those reasons that they come to Northern Ireland to invest, not just one single element of it. Of course, we have to be absolutely clear that investors come where they have strong supply chains and that, if those supply chains are broken by the protocol, that is a problem as we go forward.

### Project Stratum

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for the Economy how many premises have been provided with a full broadband connection through Project Stratum. (AQO 2008/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for his question and, indeed, for his very obvious interest in this issue. Project Stratum is the largest telecommunications infrastructure project undertaken by my Department and will utilise public funding, secured under the confidence-and-supply agreement, together with Fibrus Networks's investment, to deliver gigabit-capable broadband infrastructure to more than 76,000, primarily rural, premises across Northern Ireland. Following contract award in November 2020, the deployment of infrastructure commenced immediately. Work is under way in the first five deployment areas: Coalisland, Killyleagh, Ballycastle, Kilkeel and Castlewellan. Indeed, I had the great pleasure of talking to people in Coalisland who have been the first to be connected through this project.

To date, Fibrus Networks has completed work on some 1,041 premises through Project Stratum, with more premises to benefit from access to improved broadband services shortly. Fibrus Networks has a target of connecting approximately 19,500 premises in 2021 and is on track to achieve this. The Member will be hugely interested to hear that, in Newry and Armagh, 8,101 premises will be connected under Project Stratum. When this is complete, that will mean that 99.5% of his constituency will have access to superfast broadband.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** That ends our period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

### Workers' Rights: NDNA Commitment

T1. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) contains commitments on workers' rights, including ways to create decent jobs that give workers a meaningful voice and input into government policy development, how she will ensure that that commitment is delivered on, in cooperation with trade unions and workers' representatives. (AQT 1281/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for her question. This morning, I signed off the final draft of the first piece of legislation that we will do in this House around rights for workers. That is the parental bereavement leave Bill. I hope that this will be agreed at the Executive this week and will reach the Floor of the House very quickly. It is

hugely important in giving parents statutory rights in such a difficult situation.

The Department is also working on another, wider range of measures around employment rights and looking at many of the issues that have come to the fore over the last year. They include things like the practice of hire and fire, which is quite wrong. Employers should take the time to explain what they need to do and, if they need to restructure, do that without impacting on workers' rights. We will be bringing measures that will cover a wider range of employment rights as soon as we get the first piece of legislation through, which is the parental bereavement leave.

**Ms Dolan:** I thank the Minister for her answer. News of the parental bereavement leave is very welcome. On the issue of hire and fire, will she commit to bringing forward legislation to end this disgraceful exploitation of workers?

**Mrs Dodds:** As I indicated, it is not a practice that many in the House would support. We want to see people treated fairly, in line with the conditions that they have signed up to in their workplace. Right now, if anyone feels that they have been treated unfairly or illegally, I advise them to seek advice through either the Law Centre or the Labour Relations Agency. It is important that we protect everyone in society. As I said, I am also working on a wider range of employment issues, and these will come to the House in due course.

### EU Single Market: Maximised Accessibility

T2. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for the Economy, after welcoming the news about the parental bereavement leave Bill, whether she will introduce a strategy to maximise our unique access to the EU single market and our ability to continue to sell goods to that market, given that, in a response last week, the Minister stated that Invest NI had identified over 30 potential inward investment opportunities since the beginning of the year, which is a significant number. (AQT 1282/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** As I said in a previous answer, investors come to Northern Ireland for a wide variety of reasons. It can be about the standard of living or the skills of our people. Many investors whom I have spoken to as they come to Northern Ireland talk about that collaboration between university and business that is so important to the future of the economy. Many come because of the clusters of innovation that we now have in our economy. It is not just about one thing; it is about the whole offering that the Northern Ireland economy makes.

In relation to the protocol, we must absolutely sort out the damage that it is doing to supply chains and businesses. I write weekly to Lord Frost about the difficulties that they encounter in their trade from GB to NI.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Minister for her response. I am sure that we would all like to see the challenges posed to businesses by Brexit resolved as quickly as possible.

A recent report from the Federation of Small Businesses in Britain showed that 10% of businesses surveyed were looking for warehousing space in the North. Last week, Manufacturing NI published a survey that showed that nearly half of businesses wanted the Executive to identify and secure new opportunities for them. Do you accept that there is a need for a coordinated strategy to support

businesses in responding to the challenges that they face because of Brexit and also to maximise potential opportunities under the protocol?

**Mrs Dodds:** Of course, many of the difficulties that businesses encounter are not because of Brexit but because of the protocol. They are because parties in this House voted for, and stridently asked for, the rigorous implementation of that protocol, even though 75% of businesses in the same survey acknowledged that they had difficulties with their supply chains and businesses in GB. We really need to look at the whole picture for investment in Northern Ireland, and we need to offer people a holistic view of what Northern Ireland has to offer. I hope that the Government are listening and continue to listen, and that the EU will stop its stubborn trajectory of punishing Northern Ireland and not helping as it claimed, so many times in the past, that it was willing to do.

### Tourism: GB Market

T3. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for the Economy, after welcoming today's launch of the necessary holiday at home tourism campaign, whether she agrees that we need to see, at the very least, travel opened up across the common travel area, with our tourism sector allowed to begin marketing Northern Ireland in key GB sectors. (AQT 1283/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I absolutely agree with the Member on that point. Today, I launched the Northern Ireland tourism campaign for the summer. Realistically, we know that the vast majority of the business that will come to our hotels and hospitality sector will be from the home market. That campaign will encourage people to explore Northern Ireland and to get out and about and maybe see things that they have forgotten about or lost contact with over the past number of years. I very much hope that that campaign is successful.

However, there will not be enough business in Northern Ireland to sustain our economy or to grow tourism if we rely only on the home market. Therefore, it is very strange that we are the only part of the United Kingdom that has health guidance that suggests that if someone comes here, they have to isolate for 10 days. It is guidance, but, nevertheless, it is impossible to go into the GB market with a tourism campaign while having such guidance in place. I discussed that with Executive colleagues, and I look forward to Northern Ireland being treated equally across the common travel area and certainly across the rest of the United Kingdom. That is important for business.

**Miss McIlveen:** I thank the Minister for her response. Given the rates of infection here in comparison with those on the mainland, what does the Minister believe to be the rationale for restricting travel across the common travel area?

**Mrs Dodds:** Again, I discussed that with colleagues. Northern Ireland has a low infection rate but a comparatively higher rate than that in England, Scotland or Wales. Therefore, that cannot be the reason for restricting travel from GB to Northern Ireland. Of course, we are wary of and want to be protected from some of the COVID variants that we have heard about, but, again, many of those variants are already in the Republic or in Scotland, England and Wales, yet the infection rates in GB are lower.

We cannot continue with that situation. For the sake of our people and of allowing family and friends to visit and businesses to grow and to get us into the GB market with a good campaign for the summer, we need to review that across the common travel area.

### Holiday at Home Voucher Scheme

T4. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for the Economy what she will implement to ensure that the recently announced holiday at home vouchers will be equality assessed, given that, in her recent announcement about the vouchers, she stated that they will be allocated on a first come, first served basis. (AQT 1284/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I am absolutely adamant that we support tourism and hospitality because of the dramatic and terrible impacts that COVID has had on that part of our economy. Over 70,000 jobs are at stake in that part of the economy. Many of them are part-time and done by women or young people who do part-time hours to support themselves at college and so on.

I have a number of schemes in my economic recovery action plan to support that sector. The holiday at home voucher scheme is one. There is a budget of £2 million for the scheme. That is, obviously, a finite amount of money, and when it is done, it is done. Therefore, it will be allocated on a first come, first served basis. I hope that people will be able to avail themselves of it and that, like the high street stimulus scheme, it will continue to stimulate demand in that part of the economy so that we can continue to help it to recover.

I remind the Member that we have allocated £20 million for advertising and marketing and £17 million for other tourism support programmes. That, along with the money in the city deals, which will be a medium-term objective of tourism's recovery, mean that, once again, we will get to the high watermark that we achieved in 2019.

### 3.30 pm

**Mr McHugh:** I thank the Minister for her answer, but I am still not convinced that a system is in place to ensure that the scheme is equality assessed. Notwithstanding that, the Minister has selected a number of tourist attractions and accommodation providers that will be part and parcel of the voucher scheme. How will the Minister ensure that the impact of the scheme is spread fairly throughout the Six Counties? I am thinking in particular of my region, west Tyrone, where many an attractive site would benefit from the scheme.

**Mrs Dodds:** The objective of the scheme is to try to spread the tourism offer and therefore the benefit from tourism. Obviously, it will have a dramatic impact on the north coast, the Fermanagh lakelands and maybe in south Down and other more well known areas, but it is available to everyone and every part of Northern Ireland. It is part of the recovery of not just tourism and hospitality but the overall economy. It is part of the aim and objective of our economic recovery action plan and what we are trying to do to ensure that we have a regionally balanced economy in which everyone can prosper.

### Project Stratum: Problems

T5. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for the Economy how she will address an issue across the North that arose at a recent meeting with Fibus, the provider of Project Stratum, and which people in her constituency have made her aware of, in that users have been left out of the scheme either because Land and Property Services (LPS) did not confirm that a property was occupied or because inaccurate speeds were given to the Department or the provider, with people being told they were getting over 30Mb when, in some cases, they were not getting even 2Mb. (AQT 1285/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** That is hugely important for the people who have been excluded from the targeted intervention area and for those for whom we received incorrect data from Land and Property Services. We are working on the issue. We are trying to identify additional funding within the state aid envelope that we have for the scheme to ensure that we can bring more people into the target area and to make sure that we are not excluding anyone. The Department is working on those important issues. It is a massive scheme — the largest infrastructure project that has been undertaken in Northern Ireland. The scheme was made possible through confidence-and-supply funding of £165 million, with additional investment from Fibus adding to its value. It is exciting that, at the end of the project, Northern Ireland will have one of the most advanced networks in Europe.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** That concludes the period for topical questions. Before we return to the Climate Change Bill, I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes as we change the top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

## Assembly Business

### Standing Order 10(3A): Extension of Sitting

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

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 10 May 2021 be extended to no later than 8.00 pm. — [Ms Bailey.]*

## Private Members' Business

### Climate Change Bill: Second Stage

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill [NIA 19/17-22] be agreed. — [Ms Bailey.]*

**Mr Speaker:** The sitting may now extend to 8.00 pm, should it be necessary. By then, the debate will have had over six hours of plenary time, which is plenty of time for the balance of opinion to be expressed and party strengths recognised. The Business Committee and I have, therefore, agreed that the Minister will be called no later than 7.00 pm, the sponsor of the Bill no later than 7.30 pm and the Question put no later than 8.00 pm. I hope that all contributors yet to speak will facilitate this approach.

**Mr Blair:** I begin by thanking Clare Bailey and her team for taking the lead on this matter on behalf of concerned Members. I also commend Climate Coalition Northern Ireland for its experience, expertise and dedication to the Bill, and I thank it for its research and preparation and for keeping Members informed throughout the drafting process. Those of us who have been involved closely with the Climate Coalition will be forever grateful for its contribution and dedication.

Much of the Bill's detail has been discussed in the opening and subsequent speeches. Without going into all the detail, it is worth pointing out that, thus far, it has been a most constructive debate.

The Bill was brought forward when there was no movement on the introduction of a long-overdue and increasingly urgent climate change Act, and, in the context that Northern Ireland is the only region of these islands not to have such an Act and associated frameworks, something had to be done. Quite simply, such a situation could no longer be tolerated or defended.

Emerging from the catastrophic coronavirus crisis, our immediate priority must be how to avoid further disasters. Like with the pandemic, all of us will feel the impact of climate change, but we will not all feel it equally. The pandemic has laid bare the injustices and weaknesses in our society and economy. We have seen the damage caused by Governments acting too slowly, from having chronically underfunded public services and through the taking of flawed, short-term and self-serving decisions. We simply cannot make those same mistakes when tackling the climate crisis.

Industrialised nations such as the UK — there are others, of course — disproportionately bear responsibility for climate change, and millions are already suffering the impacts. Millions of people across the globe are immediately threatened. Climate change is destroying livelihoods, infrastructure and communities, forcing people from their homes, towns and countries. The UN Refugee Agency reported that, in 2019, weather-related hazards triggered 24.9 million displacements in 140 countries. That does not even include people forced to flee their homes as a consequence of slow-onset environment degradations such as droughts, sea-level rise and melting permafrost.

It is estimated that there could be between 25 million and one billion people on the climate change front line who will be forced to leave their homes by 2050. The crisis will only

increase in magnitude if immediate action is not taken to reduce carbon emissions rapidly. Right here in Northern Ireland, we can and must play our part.

As a member of the Agriculture Committee, I feel that it is pertinent to address the concerns raised by the agri-food sector that have been much mentioned today. Along with Alliance Party colleagues, I have met the Ulster Farmers' Union on the matter, so we are acutely aware of the union's concerns and of the huge efforts being made by farmers to tackle environmental challenges.

The agriculture sector is our greatest ally in tackling the crisis. As was outlined recently in my party's policy document 'Alliance Green New Deal':

*"Our farmers play an essential role in driving nature's recovery, and matters like cattle grazing and hedgerow maintenance are critical to protecting our wildlife and biodiversity. Across Ireland, climate and soil mean we depend on a grass-based industry."*

We are very aware of that. Our native grass and trees are crucial for carbon sequestration. The policy document adds:

*"Nevertheless, much can and must be done to make the industry more sustainable."*

It continues:

*"With around 25,000 farms in Northern Ireland, most of which are small and family-run, the Alliance Green New Deal will support our farmers in embracing environmentally beneficial farming practices, reducing their carbon footprint, and better using and protecting natural resources and biodiversity."*

In fact, I am, with AERA Committee colleagues, working with the Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN) on a motion to protect our natural environment and tackle the climate emergency while providing a profitable future for the sector. The issue of future agriculture policies, which I raised recently in Assembly questions, must enable a transition whilst providing nutritious food and increased farm resilience. Farmers contributing to sequestration and taking valuable actions to assist in the battle against climate change must therefore be assisted. We need new and better ways of rewarding them for their efforts as they continue to make progress.

I said this earlier, and it is worth repeating: the Climate Change Bill is not sector-specific. All sectors have a major part to play in tackling our carbon emissions. My colleagues Paula Bradshaw and Andrew Muir will refer to other sectors when they speak in the debate later.

Returning to the issue of COVID-19, I hope that all Departments and sectors work together to protect the environment, as well as to protect existing jobs and bring forward new green jobs. The Alliance Party is committed to a green and just recovery and to an urgent and radical overhaul of the policies and practices that have hindered our progress to date.

With that in mind, it should be said that the Bill, and its subsequent outworkings, should not and cannot be about whose idea it was first, whose policy it most closely embeds or who made additional proposals in the first instance. If there is any issue on which we can and should share vision and ambition and exhibit a determination to

move forward, surely safeguarding the future of our planet is that issue.

As a co-sponsor of the Bill, I will be supporting this stage of the Bill along with Alliance Party colleagues. We encourage others to do the same in order to progress these urgent matters for the good of our people and for our future.

### 3.45 pm

**Mr Harvey:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. The DUP is committed to addressing climate change and ensuring that this part of the United Kingdom plays its role in reducing emissions. I am a firm believer that, as custodians of our planet, we all have a moral and civic responsibility to care for the environment and to do all that we can to create safer and healthier spaces to live in and to enjoy.

As has already been said, tackling climate change is a commitment of 'NDNA':

*"The Executive will introduce legislation and targets for reducing carbon emissions in line with the Paris Climate Change Accord"*

through the bringing forward of legislation to:

*"give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning."*

I am aware that Minister Poots has been working on a climate change Bill that is in the final stages of drafting and has been awaiting approval for discussion by the Executive for a number of weeks. Given that 'NDNA' makes it clear that it is for the Executive to introduce legislation, given that the Minister has brought proposals to the Executive and given the urgency with which other parties wish to address the issue, I cannot understand why the matter has not so much as been discussed by the Executive. I find it bizarre that parties that tell us that there is a climate emergency have not even been able to find time to discuss the Agriculture Minister's Bill.

Regardless of where the Bill originates, the same core issues are at play, including the need to get a robust legislative framework that underpins environmental targets that, though ambitious, are achievable and do not require us to bankrupt our business community. On that point, I echo the sentiments of Manufacturing NI, which warned the House to be careful not to destroy jobs and livelihoods by failing to strike the right balance. I have concerns that the Bill does not strike that balance. I come to that view on the basis of the direction provided by the Climate Change Committee, the independent body tasked by the Assembly and the other UK Administrations to advise on this important issue. In its recent recommendations on Northern Ireland, it commented:

*"In every scenario for achieving UK Net Zero that we have constructed, Northern Ireland would not get to Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050."*

It also commented:

*"An 82% reduction in all greenhouse gases in Northern Ireland represents equivalent effort and a fair contribution to the UK Net Zero target."*



This Bill proposes a target of net zero by 2045. That is something that the Climate Change Committee has said is not only impossible but is unnecessary for ensuring that the UK's climate change targets are achieved.

It is evident that the Bill gives little thought to the impact that a net zero target will have on farm businesses and the wider agri-food sector. Northern Ireland is a significant net exporter of agri-food products, with nearly 50% of agri-food products produced in Northern Ireland being consumed in the rest of the UK. It is only fair, therefore, that other parts of the UK that have a lesser focus on food production bear a heavier burden in meeting the UK target. The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) regularly reminds us that NI farmers feed 10 million people in the UK. Any climate change legislation from the House must acknowledge that.

As has already been said, we must get the balance right. That is pivotal. Unachievable targets are of use to no one. We must tackle climate change head-on, but it cannot be at too high a price; otherwise, we will have achieved nothing.

**Dr Archibald:** I am really pleased to speak in this important debate. I commend those who have worked hard to progress the Bill, particularly Climate Coalition NI and the parties across the Assembly that have supported it to this stage. I am proud that my first motion of this term of the Assembly, when it was re-established last January, was to declare a climate emergency. We worked with the mover of the Bill and her party to table that motion. A collaborative approach is entirely the right approach and the only way that we can deal with the existential issue of our time.

There is no doubt that we face a climate emergency and a biodiversity crisis. Across the globe, there are some acute impacts being caused by climate change, including melting polar ice caps; increased ocean temperature and acidity; increased sea levels; deaths from weather events; droughts and famines; disease; more people being forced into climate refuge, as referenced by Mr Blair; and threats to global food security. The impact is also clearly being experienced locally, with more extreme weather events. Mr McAleer mentioned wind and flooding in his constituency, and my constituency was also impacted by the flooding in the Sperrins. We have also seen wildfires over the past couple of weeks in the Mourne. This year alone, we have had the driest and frostiest April and the coldest May Day on record.

The 2019 'State of Nature' report by RSPB outlined that 11% of species on the island of Ireland faced extinction. In the UK, 41% of species have declined since 1970, with 26% of species found in fewer places. That is the reality of what is happening around us and what will continue and worsen without action now.

In 2016, 197 parties signed up to the Paris Accord, a binding agreement that brings all nations into common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects. More than five years on, we are the only part of these islands without specific climate legislation. In January 2020, in 'New Decade, New Approach', the parties committed to bringing forward a climate change Act. Unfortunately, despite it being a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' and the expressed will of the Assembly, the AERA Minister dragged his feet on taking the action necessary to bring forward climate legislation, and so the other parties

collaborated with NGOs and activists to bring forward the Bill that we debate today.

Only then did the AERA Minister belatedly publish a discussion document to bring forward a Bill through his Department, and, disappointingly, those proposals could best be described as unambitious and somewhat leading in terms of how they were written. In that document, there is no serious discussion about how an Act would operate as an overarching framework to adhere to when creating legislation. Only basic lip service is paid to the idea of a just transition. A green new deal is not even mentioned, and, most worryingly, the proposals do not address the fact that we are an island and that these are all transboundary issues. It seems like the bare minimum, and given that the Minister has previously denied that there is a climate emergency, one can only surmise that that is why there is a complete lack of ambition in his proposals. It would have been much better if the Minister had chosen to work with the proposers of this Bill in a constructive way. Unfortunately, it seems that he has sought to undermine it rather than engaging, and the approach is somewhat disappointing, given that his office covers environment and rural communities also.

The progression of this Bill is an opportunity to have a really informed debate and discussion about the type of action that is required and how we plan to deliver on ambitious, fair and achievable decarbonisation targets together. We have the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the Government in the South, who did not engage properly with the rural community and where there is some disillusionment with the actions that are being imposed or are seen as being imposed on communities there. Over the past couple of weeks, like every other MLA, I am sure, I have received dozens of emails both supporting and expressing concern about the Bill. I thank all those who have taken the time to correspond with me. There is no doubt that there is huge support for the Bill and for climate action.

Almost all the emails that I received expressing concerns about the Bill have been from our farming community, and they are genuine concerns. I am from a largely rural constituency. I am a former member and Chair of the AERA Committee. I worked for almost 15 years in agri-food research, and I worked alongside the industry. I know its importance. I have talked to farmers about climate change. Not only do they understand it, they want to play their part, and many already do so. They are the custodians of our land, and, given that 75% of land in the North is managed for agriculture, there is much that they will contribute in delivering the action that is needed. Our farming community is and will continue to be at the coalface of the impact of climate change. Weather events that devastate land and crops; increased incidences of plant and animal pathogens, including new plant and animal diseases and pathogens being found to occur in regions where they did not occur previously; and altered growing seasons: all those things will impact on the profitability of our farmers and agri-food producers. Importantly, it also affects our food security and our ability to feed ourselves sustainably. Our farmers, like all communities, must be supported.

That means financially and in developing innovative practices and knowledge transfer to be the most sustainable that they can be.

It is not just by reducing our emissions that we will deliver on the greenhouse gas reduction required; it is by expanding our carbon sinks. Again, our farming and rural communities have much to contribute and must be supported in delivering afforestation programmes of native trees and hedgerow management that will not only act as carbon sinks but support and improve our biodiversity. Those things need to be part of the discussion and central to the action plans being developed.

Sinn Féin is completely committed to ambitious climate action: it is necessary. Inaction and half measures are not an option at this point. As it stands, we are on our way to a 3° or 4° increase on pre-industrial temperatures, which will be catastrophic for our planet. Limiting temperature increase to 1.5° will be a significant challenge and will require radical action.

Every time I have spoken on the climate and biodiversity crises and the need for action, I have emphasised the need for the principles of just transition to be embedded in that action. Climate action has to be based on social justice. It has to be equitable. It has to empower communities. That must be the guiding principle of the climate action that we deliver through the Bill.

Let me assure all those who have expressed their concerns: I hear those concerns. We hear those concerns. The Bill is a hugely positive development, and it should be seen as an opportunity. I have talked about our targets being ambitious: they must be achievable. We must be able to deliver on the targets. That will require investment in financial support for the communities impacted; in technology, research and development and innovation; and in support for businesses and entrepreneurship. It is investment that has the potential to pay off hugely for our local economy, and it must be seen as such.

In 'New Decade, New Approach', we also committed to a green new deal, which has to be core to our economic recovery from COVID. We must seek to positively transform people's lives, rapidly reducing emissions while creating good, decent-paying and secure jobs; delivering warmer homes through retrofitting; tackling fuel poverty; delivering healthier lifestyles and more efficient ways of moving around through investment in our active travel and public transport, world-class digital and physical infrastructure and an abundance of renewable and more affordable electricity from our wind and tidal resources. We must create opportunities for young people and those whose jobs will no longer exist in the way that they did.

The debate today is about the principles of the Bill. It is about moving the Bill forward to Committee Stage, where there will be opportunity for further scrutiny, input and consultation. The Bill creates a climate office and a climate commissioner. The Bill will establish the requirement for a climate action plan within three years of receiving Royal Assent and then every five years. The climate action plans would have to be approved by the Assembly, and those plans would be subject to public consultation. Nothing is being imposed or done in the scope of the Bill that will not be agreed by the Assembly.

There is scope for development to ensure that the Bill protects communities in achieving the ambitious targets that it sets out and the climate action plans that need to take account of our circumstances. A greater focus on transboundary impacts needs to be developed in the

action plans. We are an island, and there needs to be proper account and cooperation across the island.

It is positive that the just transition principles are embedded in the Bill, and there are references in clause 3(8) to reducing inequality and eliminating poverty and social deprivation. I want to see it expressly written into the Bill that achieving the net zero target and the climate action plans must be based on the principles of just transition. It is important that we define what we mean by a just transition. At its simplest, it means that transition to net zero must happen in a fair way that leaves no one behind. A report for the OECD in 2017 stated:

*"A just transition ensures environmental sustainability as well as decent work, social inclusion and poverty eradication."*

In fact, it is set out in the Paris agreement itself: national plans on climate change that include just transition measures with a centrality of decent work and quality jobs. A just transition must be based on social dialogue, as mentioned by Clare Bailey when she moved the Bill, and ensure the type of social interventions needed to secure workers' rights and livelihoods when economies shift to sustainable production to combat climate change and to protect our biodiversity.

The development of the first climate action plan should be informed through the establishment of a just transition commission that involves all partners and representatives of all sections of our society and economy. I would like to see that expressly written into the Bill.

#### 4.00 pm

The climate office described in the Bill must have meaningful civic engagement as its modus operandi. The type of radical action that is needed to halt the catastrophic breakdown of our planet will mean change. It will require a major rethink of what prosperity means. The continuing pursuit of profit and capitalist models of consumption have greatly contributed to the climate breakdown that we face, but we have the power to make change if we act now. We have to be honest with people that change is necessary. We also have to empower our communities and provide reassurance and evidence that climate action will mean job creation and community renewal. We have to lead, and we have to manage change.

I will finish by, first, speaking directly to those who have concerns about what the Bill means for them. We are listening. We believe that the best and only way to effectively tackle the climate emergency is by working in partnership through informed debate and discussion that is designed with communities for communities. The type of climate action that we are talking about cannot be done to our communities. We must have maximum buy-in to the plans that are developed. That is the only way that they will be successful. That is the process that I want to be delivered through the ambitious, achievable and fair climate change legislation. That is what Sinn Féin will be working to ensure as the Bill progresses.

Finally, when I think about the climate emergency, I think of our young people. I think of those young people on the climate strikes who have been motivated to become activists by their desire to save our planet. I think of those kids who get on to their parents about recycling, turning off the lights

and walking instead of going in the car. Those young people will inherit the planet that we leave. As political leaders, we have to do not only what is politically expedient but what is right. Protecting our planet for future generations is the very least that we can do. I support the Bill.

**Mr Wells:** It was a bright, sunny day in May 2017. I thought to myself, "I will be environmentally aware. I will not drive from Lurgan to Banbridge; I will take the bus". Off I tootled to my local bus stop in the middle of Lurgan. There he was, the bus driver, reading his newspaper. It was 'The Sun', as it turned out; I will not bring out any jokes from 'The Two Ronnies' here. While he was reading the newspaper, his engine was on. It was a bright, hot day, and, of course, the seating that Translink and Craigavon borough council kindly provided at the bus stop was directly in line with the exhaust pipes of the bus. I sat there as he read his newspaper. Fifteen minutes went by and still his exhaust was going quite merrily. He finished reading his newspaper and folded it. He walked across the street to his bank and withdrew some money. He came back to the bus and started to eat his lunch, still with the engine running. That was half an hour of exhaust fumes pouring out into the atmosphere. I wrote to Translink about that dreadful waste of energy and taxpayers' money and the resultant carbon emissions. You would think that I was asking for the impossible to suggest to it that it might ask its staff to turn off their engines when they are waiting at bus stops. I have seen that many times since. That is an example of what is going on and of the profligate way in which we use energy.

We do not have to go too far. In this Building, the recording machines for Hansard in the Committee rooms remained on for three years when the Assembly did not meet. Nobody was prepared to go and switch them off. The roof would collapse upon us if we dared to switch off those machines in the three years in which we did not meet. We recorded the hottest day in Northern Ireland's history, and, of course, the heating was on full in the Building on that hottest day. All attempts to get the heating turned off fell flat with no success whatsoever.

The problem is, Mr Deputy Speaker — Mr Speaker, sorry; I have enough trouble with you without calling you Deputy Speaker. The problem is, Mr Speaker, that 24% of the energy that we use in Northern Ireland is wasted; it goes down the plughole. If we could solve that problem, we would not have to burden our farmers with very strict emissions targets.

We would have to do very little to increase our renewable energy demands because we could solve the problem simply by not wasting the stuff that we already produce. Any time that yours truly — an obscure Back-bencher from South Down, who is of no great political import — raises that with any of the authorities, you would think that I was asking for the sun, the moon and the stars. Nobody is prepared to tackle the absolutely basic point that we could utilise now to protect our planet.

Bringing our emissions down to net zero by 2045 will be painful for all of us: industry, private consumers and farmers. We cannot reverse the juggernaut of climate change without huge pain. As the honourable Member for East Londonderry pointed out, however, the consequences of not doing it might be that we do not have an agriculture industry in the future. If we allow our planet to go the way that it is going, we might not be able to produce enough food to feed ourselves in the future.

I do not know how many emails, letters and phone calls I have received about this issue. I suspect that the number is second only to the number that came to me on the debate on abortion. Many people in South Down asked me to support the Bill, and many people, most of them farmers, asked me not to do so. I suspect that we have all had the same email from the farming community, which, I believe, was instigated by the Ulster Farmers' Union. It is a fact that what we are asking for will produce pain for the farming community, but we have the mechanisms to deal with that.

First, everyone thus far has said that there has to be protection for vulnerable groups by means of a transition to a net zero target. The fallback is that any targets and policies will have to be agreed by the Assembly. Ms Bailey's Bill sets up a framework, but, time and time again, issues will come back to the Assembly for a final decision. The Bill is only at Second Stage. It will go off to the Committee for further consultation and scrutiny. Assembly Committees have been good at dealing with complex Bills. We are often maligned by the public, but, through our ability to ask questions for written answer and, through Committees, to scrutinise Bills, legislation and policies, we have been successful. Nobody will report that in tomorrow's newspapers.

The Bill will go off to the Committee. I have no doubt that the Committee, led by Mr Irwin who is one of its prime spokesmen, will scrutinise every jot and tittle of the Bill and pore all over it. No doubt it will come back to the Assembly in a different shape and form from that in which it entered the Committee. There is an opportunity to deal with the issues and the legitimate concerns of the farming community about the emissions targets.

We have in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom a unique system of farm support. I still call it the single farm payment, but Mr Irwin, being the guru and the font of all knowledge on the issue, will point out the exact terminology that is now used. The single farm payment is the mechanism that we inherited from the European Union and that we now control for ourselves. That can be used as a mechanism to compensate farmers and to cushion the blow that will undoubtedly occur as a result of the targets.

No matter what Bill we adopt, be it Ms Bailey's or the Minister's — I have no doubt that the Minister's Bill arrived very quickly because Ms Bailey's Bill was coming down the railway line, and, in a rush, the Minister's Bill suddenly appeared as Ms Bailey's Bill was published — there will have to be reductions in emissions from all sectors in Northern Ireland. Some might argue that the Minister's Bill will be less painful than the Green Party's Bill, but it will have to be done. We must take the mechanism that we already have in place to ensure that we minimise the damage to all sectors as a result of the emissions targets.

I see the single farm payment as a way of allowing farmers to adjust to the new landscape by compensating them through a mechanism that has worked very well. I do not believe that it necessarily means that farmers will be out of pocket, but it will be painful.

We have a resource in Northern Ireland. If we stopped wasting energy — I do not think that we will, because many Northern Ireland people are not happy unless they are wasting energy in some form — that would make a major contribution, but we in Northern Ireland and, indeed, the

Irish Republic have a unique resource, which, if properly utilised, would be a much less painful way to deal with this climate change issue. Peat covers 18% of our land. Peat covers only 3% of the land area of the entire world, and yet it stores more carbon than all the other vegetation in the world put together. We have a vast tract of peatland, which, if properly utilised, could form a carbon store of immeasurable consequence. It has been shown that, if you take degraded peatland and restore it by a process known as re-wetting, you can form a carbon sink, which can do so much to reduce emissions from industrial and farming processes.

That begs the question: if 18% of our land is peat, and it is our most valuable tool to sequester carbon, why are we still allowing the destruction of peatlands in Northern Ireland? Why are we still giving planning permission for peat removal, and why are we permitting peatlands to be drained, burned and damaged when we have this essential tool that could save the day? There must be a complete moratorium on all further damage to peatlands immediately. There must be a policy, which is only just starting, to re-wet those peatlands. I am aware of the excellent project on the Garron plateau and of the work at Cuilcagh in Fermanagh. That is a good step forward, but we really need to get our act together to protect this valuable habitat.

Now, of course, Dolores Kelly has tabled a motion for tomorrow that will deal with that issue to a large extent, but I want to make the point that we have two areas where we can immediately take action to reduce emissions — wastage and peatlands — but we are not doing anything about them, and both are an awful lot less painful than imposing restrictions on other parts of our economy.

Finally, Northern Ireland is extremely blessed with a lot of wind and land suitable for solar panels and tree planting. Again, those are much less painful ways to deal with the problem.

**Mr McGuigan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Wells:** I certainly will.

**Mr McGuigan:** I listened to the Member intently, and he has used the word “painful” half a dozen to maybe a dozen times during the debate. Does he agree that, when constructing a narrative about climate change, using the word “painful” is doing a disservice to what the Bill is about? Clean energy production, less air pollution, more active travel, more green energy, businesses investing in the future, our children and grandchildren having a much better future: this is not painful, and there are many positives that society will gain from the Bill.

**Mr Wells:** It grieves me to say this, but the honourable Member speaks a lot of sense. Yes, he is absolutely right that there are real rewards for our community when we get to our final goal. There is a healthier environment, less dependency on fossil fuels and less waste of precious resources. However, in order to get from our present position to that holy grail, there will be pain and difficult decisions will have to be made. There will have to be reductions in emissions, and there will have to be compensation —.

**Mr McGuigan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Wells:** I certainly will.

**Mr McGuigan:** Does the Member agree with me and my party colleague who spoke before me that it is imperative that there is a just transition so that nobody loses out on this path to net zero?

**Mr Wells:** It grieves me even further to agree with the Member on that point. He is absolutely right.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Wells:** Certainly: this is trouble.

**Mr Allister:** In this situation, is it not a little too simplistic to say that no one loses out, when we know that our agri-food industry will lose up to 50% of its production and that meat eaters, which the Member is not, will find that they are exporting their carbon to import their meat supplies, which will no longer be supplied locally?

Is it not rather trite to suggest that no one will lose out?

#### 4.15 pm

**Mr Wells:** Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right: I am stuck in the middle on my own. The Member makes a point that, I know, is held by many in the farming community. We have a system whereby we can use the mechanisms that we already have to ease the pain — that is where I disagree with the honourable Member to my right — that there will be for some people in this process, and there will be pain. As long as the farming community believes that it is being treated fairly and that, if society demands that it reduce its emissions, society is also prepared to use the mechanism that it already has to compensate farmers for that, the farmers will join us and support us in what we are doing.

What we cannot do, however, is leave the farming community behind, marooned, because, as everyone has said, it has a tremendous role to play — a crucial role to play — as we move to net zero. There is no doubt that we cannot do it without the farming community. The only way in which we will do it with the farming community is to have mechanisms in place to ensure that it does not lead to the massive reduction in farm incomes that the Member mentioned and that we can compensate farmers. It is difficult. It will stretch everybody in the Chamber and on the Committee and, indeed, the Minister to achieve it, but it is the only way forward, if we are to deliver an effective Climate Change Bill.

If anyone had told me when I first came into the Chamber, a very long time ago, that over half of our electricity generation would be achieved through renewables, I would have laughed. It was pie in the sky. It was impossible. That is exactly what we have done. Northern Ireland now has a very high rate of renewable electricity generation, and that is just from wind turbines. We have not scratched the surface of generation from solar panels. I am beginning to see farms start to be developed. I know that the honourable Member for North Antrim has a particular problem in his area. I will get my retaliation in first before he raises the issue. The reality, however, is that Northern Ireland has huge potential for solar energy. Even in our climate, which is not the sunniest, it is amazing what modern technology can now do in order to achieve a high rate of renewable energy. There is an opportunity there for the farming community.

I will raise the issue of afforestation. One of the best ways in which to control carbon emissions and reduce

the amount of carbon in the atmosphere is through tree planting. Again, Northern Ireland is one of the least afforested parts of the United Kingdom and, indeed, in Europe. Vast areas of Northern Ireland could be used for tree planting. Courtesy of the Minister, we already have an attractive system of grants and subsidies that enable farmers to set aside land to plant trees, and the payments are spread over 25 years. Those should be used to a much greater level in order to diversify farm incomes.

I must say how disappointed I am in the Minister and the Department. Last Saturday, I opened 'Farming Life', in which Mr Irwin features at least three or four times every week, and I saw the announcement of a large afforestation project; from memory, I think that it was in County Antrim. It was all well and good — 50 hectares and hundreds of thousands of trees — until I read that half of the trees were to be Sitka spruce. We will get absolutely nowhere in increasing biodiversity and improving the emissions problem in Northern Ireland if we believe that planting exotic, foreign, coniferous trees here will do anything to help the situation. I felt disappointed when I read that. The Minister has announced a major tree-planting programme, but all attempts to tie him down on what proportion of it will be native Irish/Ulster/British trees have failed. They must all be native trees. You cannot increase diversity by going back to the serried ranks of conifers that have marked hillsides so much for many years. That has to stop. We have to go back to the oak, the birch, the sycamore and all those species that, we know, are good for biodiversity and climate change. That penny has not dropped yet. What I am trying to say in my inadequate way is that there are options available that, if we take them now, can turn round the juggernaut of climate change. Those options will have less — I will not say the word "pain", as I have been hauled up already for saying that — they will be less challenging than if we simply leave it too late and end up in a situation where emissions have got out of control.

People may say, "Why should we bother? This is little Northern Ireland, just six counties. We are part of the UK, but, sure, we are only 3% of the population, and our percentage of emissions is just slightly above that". We have two fundamental problems. First, we are part of a big polluter: the UK. The UK has the fifth largest economy in the world, so we have to be seen to play our part in the overall UK target. Secondly, even though Northern Ireland has a population of only 1.8 million, its emissions are much higher than those of many African countries. In the Sahel region of Africa, you have countries with populations 10 and 15 times higher than the population in Northern Ireland, but their emissions per head are so much lower that their overall contribution to global climate change is very small. Northern Ireland cannot sit back and say, "We'll just forget about this and pass on it"; we have to do something to help lead the world, as Scotland, Wales and the Irish Republic have all done. We have to play our part. We are the only part of the United Kingdom that does not have a climate change Act. That is our first difficulty. Secondly, how can we lecture other countries? How can we say to small, impoverished nations that have very low levels of GDP, "You must take challenging steps to reduce your climate emissions", if we are not prepared to do it ourselves? We simply cannot do that. That is why Ms Bailey is absolutely right to move this Bill and why Mr Poots is absolutely right to move his Bill. Hopefully,

between the two, we will arrive at a situation where we play our role.

Mr Allister, the honourable Member for North Antrim, made a rather disparaging comment about vegetarianism. As far as I know, there are only three vegetarians in the Chamber, but just remember this: it takes 16 pounds of grain to produce one pound of meat. I will put it another way: if everybody in the world was vegetarian, we could feed the planet three times over and still have a surplus. We have to face the fact that we have only one planet. To sustain ourselves to the level of the United States or Germany, we would need four planets, and we do not have that option. We have to start thinking about our diet and how we produce food.

The frightening thing is that the only reason that 1.1 billion Indians and 1.4 billion Chinese can survive is that they have a largely plant-based diet. The frightening spectre that we have, as a planet, is of those two huge populations adopting a Western diet with all the energy demands that that entails. If that happens, we really will have a problem. In that scenario, our population could remain static, but we would have two major concentrations of people moving rapidly towards a diet and a lifestyle that is incredibly demanding on our planet. Therefore —

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to focus more on the principles of the Bill. This is the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill. Equally, the Business Committee, as we announced earlier, has agreed that the Assembly sitting will finish at 8.00 pm. We will call the Minister to respond at 7.00pm, and he has confirmed that he will take only half an hour to speak, as has the sponsor of the Bill. The business will conclude at 8.00 pm. I ask the Member to be understanding of the fact that quite a number of Members still want to speak, but that the sitting will end at 8.00 pm, whatever happens.

**Mr Wells:** I assure you, Mr Speaker, that I will not be speaking at 7.00 pm. I was just about to draw my remarks to a conclusion.

It is good for the Assembly that we are dealing with the issue. I have already heard some very useful contributions from all sides. We should allow the Bill to continue to Committee Stage, where, no doubt, many Members are waiting to get their teeth into it. We can then come back and give it further consideration. By the time that process is finished, knowing the track record of the Assembly, we will have made a major contribution on the issue.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for that.

**Ms Anderson:** Sinn Féin has been consistent on the need for climate justice and for a climate change Act in the North because we are living in the middle of a climate emergency. In Derry and the north-west, we have already seen the impact of severe weather, with flash flooding and, at times, scorching heatwaves and storms that have been battering more relentlessly over the last decade. In August 2017, 70 millimetres of rain — around 63% of the rainfall of August — fell in just nine hours, and homes, businesses, agriculture, infrastructure and habitats were destroyed. Four hundred homes were affected. The A5 was closed for three days. Local farmers lost tens of thousands of pounds due to land damage, and five bridges were completely washed away. Then, in 2018, we had 58 consecutive days without rainfall, straining farmlands, causing water shortages and hospital admissions, not to mention gorse

fires raging throughout. Being the only part of these islands without bespoke climate legislation is unacceptable because it is our duty as public representatives and custodians of this land to do everything in our power to keep global temperature increases to less than 1.5° Celsius on the pre-industrial level. If we fail to do that — we will fail if the Bill does not go through, and I welcome the fact that we are discussing the principles of it today — the consequences for our island, our peatlands, our wetlands, our ancient forest and mountain life in all its natural beauty could well face extinction.

My Sinn Féin colleague Declan McAleer spoke about the rural community and farmers, and we have all received emails from farmers, particularly in recent days, who must be consulted and must be listened to so that there is, as has been said, a just transition. I also acknowledge the Sinn Féin spokesperson Philip McGuigan, who has led the Sinn Féin position on climate justice from the front and is a proud co-signatory of the Bill.

The Bill provides a framework for decisive action in the North because we are failing to adequately reduce carbon emissions. When you consider that, between 2008 and 2016, the North managed to reduce emissions by only 9%, you see that that is totally unacceptable. Unless urgent action is taken across this island, we will be on a trajectory for natural disaster, so I urge all the MLAs to vote in favour of sending the Bill to Committee Stage so that its principles can be fully and transparently discussed and considered, as has been outlined today.

The Bill gives us an opportunity to tackle an endless cycle of extraction, under-regulated capitalistic growth and materialism that has brought our planet to the brink. Business as usual is no longer an option. That is why Sinn Féin tabled a motion in February 2020 declaring a climate emergency and why my party colleague Declan McAleer, as Chair of the Agriculture Committee, tabled a motion calling on Minister Poots to introduce a climate change Act. However, Minister Poots continued to drag his boots. He only started to take action when every other party in the Chamber came together to bring forward this Bill, and I acknowledge and congratulate all who were involved in that.

I welcome the fact that the Bill sets out the framework for the creation of a climate action plan to put us on an ambitious trajectory for net zero carbon emissions by 2045. A cornerstone of the Bill is the fact that a climate action plan will be co-designed with sectors, businesses and industries to work to make crucial and fundamental change.

Of course, change can be challenging, which makes it all the more important that we ensure a just transition, as has been referred to today and is outlined in the Bill, so that crucial action to protect our environment does not disadvantage anyone who is already struggling to make ends meet.

#### 4.30 pm

The Bill offers us the chance to be ambitious, fair and deliverable and to protect workers, farmers, families and communities by protecting and enhancing our natural world. The climate action plan that is envisaged in the Bill will, without doubt, with reference to energy production and supply, revolutionise our electricity production and

consumption, which was mentioned earlier as one of the things that should be taken account of. Currently, as has been stated by other Members, almost half of our electricity in the North comes from renewable sources. As good as that is, it is not enough. The sectoral plans that are envisaged by the Bill should take account of changes that need to be undertaken in, for instance, the transport sector. I know that the Minister has been doing work on all of that. As more hydrogen buses get on the road, we need to have the skills base to maintain them and the ability to fuel them locally. If we do not produce local hydrogen, we will unravel any environmental benefits that are referred to in the Bill by shipping tanks of hydrogen into the North from abroad.

The hydrogen production industry is set to be worth something in the region of £2.5 trillion globally by 2050. That is an opportunity for the Economy Minister, who should not attempt to shunt it into a small corner of the north-east, particularly as the natural geography of Derry and the north-west, including Donegal, is perfectly suited to, and in the perfect location for, the generation of wind energy, which is referred to in the sectoral plans of the Bill and is necessary for the production of hydrogen. I have been centrally involved in showcasing Derry and Donegal to investors; I have exposed to them what the Bill sets out regarding energy production and supply, which is in abundance in the north-west. The Bill sets out the ultimate objective of achieving net zero emissions, and hydrogen opportunities can help to achieve that in Derry, investing in economically sustainable jobs and tackling regional inequalities in the north-west.

In relation to what the Bill says around energy production and supply, I have already initiated conversations with, for instance, Magee university, the Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Derry and Strabane council, Donegal council, the Foyle port and NI Water to help to advance the opportunity for Derry and the north-west city region to capture the all-Ireland opportunities to advance climate justice. In fact, over the past number of months, I have done more for Derry with potential investors than Invest NI has. That would not be too hard, but that is another debate for another day. I know that you will not want me to stray into that.

The bottom line remains that we are at a crossroads. We can choose to do more of the same or to protect our natural world. The longer we dilly-dally over choosing which path to go down, the less of our natural world we will protect. The next stage of the process will be vital in understanding and shaping a climate change Act that will protect people, our ecology and our environment.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the principal sponsor of the Bill for its introduction here today. My party colleague Mark, the Member for Foyle, is a co-sponsor of the Bill. When he was Environment Minister in 2015, he proposed a climate action Bill at the time of the Paris Accord in order to keep the rise in global average temperature to well below 2°C, which is above pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the increase to 1.5°C.

We have an obligation and a responsibility to meet those commitments. The commitment to climate change is a commitment to social justice. The delay in seeing a climate change Bill brought before the Assembly has been because of a number of issues, among them the denial of some Members of the current Environment Minister's party

and the absence of an Executive, when members of the deputy First Minister's party walked from the Assembly. Nevertheless, we are where we are today, and, indeed, when the Assembly declared a climate emergency in February last year, the Minister, along with his party, voted against that declaration.

However, as we look at this —

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGlone:** Yes, sure, Jim.

**Mr Wells:** Not all of his party voted against that motion. I was very much in favour of declaring a climate change emergency.

**Mr McGlone:** Thanks very much for your elucidation, Jim. I appreciate that, thank you.

It is good to see the Bill in front of the Assembly today and to see the debate under way. The Bill is unambiguous in its ambitions. It sets down in legislation a commitment to a target of net zero by 2045 compared with 1990 levels and puts in place a framework for the delivery of that target. Some Members will raise the advice of the UK Climate Change Committee. I accept its advice for what it is: it is its expert opinion based on the evidence that is available to it. However, as the Climate Change Committee has pointed out:

*“there is no purely technical reason”*

why we cannot meet a net zero target for greenhouse gas emissions. As the chair of the Climate Change Committee, Lord Deben, said to the AERA Committee of the advice that the CCC provides, its job is to:

*“make sure that you, as a Government, and the arrangements that you have in the North of Ireland, are such that you can genuinely say to all the people of the Province that you are absolutely able to reach this end”.*

He also told the Committee:

*“if you were to decide that you wanted to do better than that, we would be very pleased indeed.”*

It is also worth noting that since the CCC appeared before the AERA Committee, the United States and the UK have significantly updated their commitments to much more ambitious targets than before.

The SDLP supports the Bill not only because we want to do better but because we must do better. Reaching net zero by 2045 will not be easy, but it is essential. The latest NI greenhouse gas inventory estimates for 2018 show a 20% decrease in emissions compared with 1990 levels. The current projections estimate only a 39% reduction by 2030 compared with 1990 levels. Agriculture remained the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions for Northern Ireland in 2018, at 27%. The share is expected to increase to 35% in 2030 as a result of the improved performances of other sectors, with only a 3% reduction in agricultural emissions.

That is not sustainable, but there have been many scare stories about what the Bill will do to farmers. I represent a rural constituency, and I have no intention of putting farmers or the agri-food sector out of business. I was really glad to hear the proposer of the Bill, Ms Bailey,

say that, from her party's point of view, the Bill does not assign sectoral targets. Parallel to that, however, or as a consequence of it, we would welcome a cross-departmental just transition working group that would not only audit comprehensively the environmental potential but look at the social consequences in terms of food prices etc, the economic and business implications and opportunities as well as the energy implications and changes in the use of energy, which Mr Wells mentioned. Also, for those of us who live in rural areas, there are big transport implications for that and the necessary requirements for properly funded infrastructure, whether that be electrical or, indeed, changes in the types of existing modes of transport that are being used. I suggest that that working group come up with proposals for government to support and incentivise the various sectors and industries, such as farming, in order to help them to make that transition and to support them through that change.

Change can be welcome, or it can be a challenge.

This change is inevitable, because it is needed. I can think of one particular night in 2014 when, at 2.00 am, I was standing in Sandy Braes, which is in an estate in Magherafelt, and we were up to our knees in floodwaters as a result of flash flooding, which had never happened there before. The incident in Glenelly valley, which the Chair knows much better than I do, caused a crisis for a lot of farmers. I have been to Curran, which is a small townland between Maghera and Magherafelt, where the River Moyola burst its banks, and new houses were flooded. That had never happened before. Indeed, last year, the same thing happened with the River Moyola, and a house on River Road in Draperstown that had never been flooded before had 1 metre of water in it. Those incidents are not happening by coincidence. They are being caused by a change that we must stymie and try to stop. That is why the Bill is before us today.

Given the sectors that are affected, the aim must be to maintain the profitability of farms, the agri-food sector and other businesses; to promote new methods and ways that are equally, if not more, sustainable and, indeed, profitable for them; and to encourage the use of less environmentally damaging methods and practices. It would be for the working group to see through that work and bring forward proposals for financial support or other incentivisation for the various sectors.

We need to build social benefits into the reduction efforts so that communities can see it working for them. Bringing communities with us as we reduce greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors — energy, transport, business and agriculture — is key to successfully making the transition to a net zero society. I welcome that the Chair, Mr Declan McAleer, said earlier that the Committee will ensure that there is inclusivity and that all voices will be listened to so that the legislation, in its final form, represents the needs of the community. There are many, many needs, and I was glad to hear the Chair say that.

With a fair and ambitious target in place, we can shape policy to meet that target and put in place support and incentives to help all sectors. We have a responsibility to help to meet the net zero target of not just Britain and the rest of Ireland but the net zero target globally. Importantly, as the Bill works its way through the AERA Committee, the consultation process will be uppermost.

Again, I thank the Bill's sponsor for moving its Second Stage. I welcome working with the Committee and with her as it progresses through the Committee and its various stages.

**Mr Chambers:** I do not believe that many Members, if indeed any, do not recognise that climate change needs urgent attention. It is not just an issue for Northern Ireland. Rather, it is a global topic that requires international action.

Today, the Assembly has the opportunity to debate the issue and to start to find a way forward that attempts to confront and mitigate the problem. However, it is equally important that we do not create legislation that presents severe and perhaps unachievable challenges for any of our citizens, especially those who may have their livelihood curtailed or damaged as a result.

Like others, in recent days, I have received a large number of emails from those in our important agriculture sector. Some were irate; others were very reasonable in setting out the challenges that they might face from any legislation that flows from the Bill as it stands.

The one common theme in all the emails is that everyone recognises that climate change is a reality. It is a reality that we must address in the interests of the welfare of our children and our grandchildren in the future. No one is in denial. The biggest fear expressed in the correspondence that I have received from those in the agriculture sector was about the timelines outlined in the Bill. Suggestions that herd sizes need to be reduced to achieve zero carbon emissions by 2045 are a major concern for the farmers who contacted me.

Many of their concerns are around large investments that they have recently made based on business plans that go beyond the Bill's timeline targets. Others are about to make investments but are concerned that family members who inherit the farm will be left with business plans that start to unravel, creating financial difficulties for them in the future.

#### 4.45 pm

I have a background in business, and I understand their concerns and recognise the need for certainty when making long- to medium-term investments. We all rely heavily on the financial support of banks when we embark on such investments in our businesses. The Bill may make banks nervous about long-term lending if there is any suspicion that forward financial and business planning could be disrupted by challenges thrown up by legislation. Some local farmers have called with me personally. Their approaches have been civil and heartfelt. From listening to them, I have been impressed by the steps that they are already taking on their farms to reduce carbon emissions and by how they carry out their work. That has reassured me that I have been engaging with people who are on the same page as the Assembly in recognising the dangerous reality of climate change.

I will support the Bill today because it is the right thing to do for the community that I represent. It is also the right thing to do for my grandchildren and everyone else's grandchildren. However, I have listened to our agriculture sector, and I recognise that some of their concerns are genuine and set firmly in reality. They want to reach the position of a zero carbon emission level. They support our aspiration to achieve that. That said, I believe that

meaningful amendments will need to be tabled and timelines revisited as the Bill progresses. We cannot afford to make legislation that will have unforeseen consequences that may damage not only our agriculture sector but other areas of our economy. We must go forward together in common cause, and, to achieve that, we will need those meaningful amendments. I believe that there will be the will in the House to produce legislation that everyone will support and that will be achievable. We need to get this right. To that end, I will give a pledge to our agriculture industry that I will support all amendments to the Bill that will make that sector feel more comfortable with any resulting legislation.

**Mr M Bradley:** I agree wholeheartedly that a Climate Change Bill is necessary and urgent, and I thank my AERA Committee colleague Ms Bailey for introducing the Bill to the Assembly. However, I worry about its impact on the agri-food and farming industry, which will be most affected.

It has been a good debate so far, and I will try not to replicate some of the excellent points that Members have raised. Increasing rainfall, unpredictable storms, landslides and the threat to habitat and species, which was highlighted recently by the Mourne wildfire, are all warning signs that cannot be ignored. Climate change is the world's most pressing emergency, and I agree that we in Northern Ireland must do our bit to combat rising seas, rising temperatures and unstable weather patterns. We need more than words and lip service. We are in the midst of an emergency, but it is an emergency that needs to be properly funded to ensure that any climate change Bill is a success. That cost has not been factored in as yet.

We need to be part of a joined-up strategy that is properly funded and has measurable outcomes, and that is in line with the rest of the UK and our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland. There are differences regionally in industrial usage. Here in Northern Ireland, agriculture is one of our main industries and employers, and we cannot overlook that industry. Its input is vital. One such measure is the reinstatement of bog and peatlands, and more needs to be achieved quickly on the reforestation of Northern Ireland. Here I agree with my colleague Mr Wells. Where suitable, native broadleaf trees must be planted in preference to coniferous trees.

On renewable energy, whether that be wind farms or solar farms, we need to gravitate away from fossil fuels and use green energy. The Bill heralds a time when all stakeholders need to sit down and discuss a time frame for a strategy on the way forward. We need to involve processors, wholesalers, corporate food retailers, industry and the general public. We also need to look at airlines, both passenger and freight. Burning 5 litres of aviation fuel at 30,000 feet is the equivalent of burning 25 litres on the ground, yet many of us cannot wait to get away on holidays. A societal change is also necessary.

In addition, the shipping and corporate haulage industries use massive amounts of fossil fuel, with too much of it used to bring beef and dairy products into Northern Ireland, while we export up to 80% from Northern Ireland. Burning home heating oil, gas and coal across Northern Ireland and having fossil-fuel vehicles that produce the worst emissions possible damage our environment.



Although I support having a climate change Bill, I would rather wait until the Minister's Bill is brought before the House. To that end, I encourage the Executive Committee to grant its introduction as soon as possible. I believe that it has been with the Executive Committee for the past four weeks. I fear that having two separate Bills on climate change will be counterproductive. I therefore prefer to wait until the Minister's climate change Bill can be heard, in order to see which better benefits all of us in Northern Ireland or to see whether the two Bills can complement each other. It is too important not to look at all the issues.

We are in the middle of an emergency. If we do not take stock now, it will be our children and our children's children who will suffer the consequences.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Bill's main sponsor, Clare Bailey, for bringing it to Second Stage. It is a privilege to be a named co-sponsor of this important Bill on behalf of my party, and I am delighted to speak today in its favour.

I point out the broad, cross-party support for the Bill and its desired outcomes. This progressive Bill is a good example of MLAs in this institution cooperating. Indeed, it is an excellent example of cooperation between MLAs and civic society.

As politicians, there are many vital and important issues deserving of our attention. We are still dealing with the effects of a global pandemic. We are trying to keep our citizens safe and well as we move towards reopening society, and building back our economy must be an immediate priority. Rebuilding our health service, tackling inequalities in education, boosting our economy, dealing with Brexit-related issues, progressing and shaping positive and progressive politics towards a shared future on this island and many more vital issues also require our attention, now and in the time ahead. There can be absolutely no doubt, however, that the defining political issue for this generation, on this island and beyond, is the climate emergency that we all face. How we deal with it will determine the types of chances given to our children and grandchildren and the type of world in which they get to grow up.

*"Every week, a different report or study alerts us to the real and catastrophic dangers of global warming." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 129, p371, col 1].*

That is a sentence I read out last July, during the last debate on the need for climate legislation to be brought forward. Those alarming reports have not stopped being produced since then.

Just a few short weeks ago, the United Nations produced its 'State of the Global Climate 2020: Provisional Report', stating in it that 2020 was one of the three hottest years on record, marked by wildfires, droughts, floods and melting glaciers, which prompted the UN Secretary-General to say that the world stands:

*"on the verge of the abyss".*

Hopefully, nobody in the Chamber is still in denial about the extent of the problem that we face and the need for urgent action to be taken on our part.

I listened to Clare intently as she outlined the likely impact on the world that we live in with each degree increase in temperature. Her contribution reminded me of a recent

radio debate, because a similar debate is going on in the South on climate legislation. I cannot remember the name of the contributor to that debate, but he stated that sometimes the science is overly complicated and turns people off. He described the impact in lay terms, and compared the growth in the Earth's core temperature to that of rising body temperature in humans. Internal body temperature is normally, as we know, 37°C. He said that, if it rises by one or two degrees, you have a fever. With the rise of another degree, you are in hospital. If there are any further rises in temperature without reduction, you die. He went on to say that we have not seen the changes in temperature that we are currently seeing in millennia, since the last ice age. In fact, the six hottest years ever recorded were between 2015 and 2020, yet we are the only part of these islands not to have climate legislation. What message does that send?

Through the Bill, I want to be part of shaping legislation that shows our citizens that we in the Chamber are prepared, not only to join with others across the globe and show leadership but to set a direction of travel that will build a better, just and economically and environmentally vibrant economy for the citizens of the North whom we represent.

Climate impacts are not happening only in far-off places. We have all witnessed the growing number of freak weather patterns in the North. The Chair of the Agriculture Committee described the incident in the Glenelly valley. My colleague on the AERA Committee Patsy McGlone described floods in Curran and Magherafelt. Having grown up in south Derry, I know those places well. Whilst he was speaking, I googled the exact date and year of the freak snow and ice conditions that wiped out more than 10,000 animals and damaged farm properties in the Glens of Antrim. On a growing and more regular basis, all of us, as elected representatives, are dealing with issues associated with the rise in global temperatures.

I want to see the North move to enjoy fossil-free energy supplies. I want to see our businesses thrive and prosper as part of a green new deal. I want to see our transport system transformed through government strategies that support a comprehensive public transport system and which put active travel at the top of their agenda. I want to see our farmers and rural communities rewarded for good environmental practices and the protection of the land and the environment. I want to see people who live in big towns and cities living free from the dangers of air pollution. I want to see all of that come about through a just transition that helps to lift the most vulnerable in society.

Some people listening to this will be rolling their eyes and thinking, "That is lovely rhetoric, but we have heard it all before and for years". They would be right to think that. We cannot rhetoric the climate emergency away; it requires action. For us, as legislators in the North, the Climate Change Bill is that action. The Bill will commit the Executive to creating a climate action plan containing annual targets on various emissions and environmental quality standards and measures on how those targets can be met, with the overriding ultimate goal of a net zero carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable economy by 2045. That is ambition.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGuigan:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** I think that everybody in the House would agree with that, even those who do not believe in climate change. Would he agree with me that there are many options to get to net zero and that some will be more painful than others? Does he accept that forestation, the increased use of solar panels, and the re-wetting of peatlands would reduce the difficulties that some sectors will have? For instance, re-wetting 10,000 acres of peatland will have a lot less dramatic impact on agriculture than reducing herd sizes by 50%.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I found the debate strange in that I have agreed with some of the things that he said.

There will be quick wins. As stated by the proposer of the Bill, and by many of the other Members who spoke, the Bill is not prescriptive on the way forward. The real heavy lifting will come once the Bill becomes law and we start to engage in the action plans and set the targets in each sector. I agree that there will be easy and quick wins in the first years. We should explore all of those.

Steve Aiken is not here, but I listened to him describe his earlier days as a nuclear submarine —. I do not know what you call someone who drives a nuclear submarine. Is it a pilot? Is it a lead? He said that that did not exactly set him up as an eco-warrior. I am Sinn Féin's environment and climate change spokesperson, but I do not consider myself an eco-warrior either. I was recently labelled as a trendy, lefty eco-warrior during a discussion that I had with somebody about the importance of creating more cycling and active travel infrastructure. I am not sure whether it was meant as a joke, an insult or a compliment. Maybe it was just a reaction to the growth of my ginger beard.

**5.00 pm**

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGuigan:** Yes.

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Member agree that there is nothing stopping us building a more extensive walking and cycling infrastructure and that it should happen now, regardless of any Bill for climate change?

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to focus on the principles of the Bill.

**Mr McGuigan:** Gabh mo leithscéal, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his intervention. He is absolutely correct. Five kilometres of cycling-only infrastructure a year in the past five years is completely unacceptable. There is nothing to stop an increase in that.

I do not believe that the environment, dealing with climate change and protecting the earth for future generations should be the sole preserve of environmentalists or party environment spokespeople. The issue is far too important and wide reaching for that. Having said that, I commend all of the activists who, over decades, have kept the issue to the fore of the public and political agenda. In particular, I commend the young activists across the North who, in recent years, as has been said numerous times, took to the streets to highlight and campaign on the issue.

The majority of MLAs want to see climate legislation passed. That has been clearly demonstrated repeatedly. In the debate here in July, the majority of MLAs voted for the Minister to introduce climate change legislation

within three months. That is the debate in which Members will remember the Minister, when describing the climate challenge that we face, saying:

*"We should not use language such as 'emergency' or 'crisis'" — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 129, p380, col 1].*

He also said that the Bill could not be produced within three months. Thankfully, others disagreed. I pay tribute to those in Climate Change NI who listened to the debate and heard the positivity and desired will of the majority of MLAs and worked to produce the Bill that is before us. They all deserve immense credit.

However, as is the case with all legislation, it is vital that we get it right. Today is only the second stage in that process. Despite the fact that climate legislation will be transformative for all of society and every sector within it, lots of today's debate has been taken up by what it could mean for our agriculture sector. I totally understand that. I represent North Antrim, which is, primarily, a rural constituency, the local economy of which relies heavily on tourism and agriculture. Like most MLAs, I have family members, friends and neighbours who are farmers. Agriculture is a vital part of my constituency, and it is vital to the economy in the North. I see nothing in the Bill that will jeopardise that, but I know that if we do not tackle growing temperatures, the negative impacts of climate change will greatly damage agriculture in my constituency and beyond, over the years to come.

Key to the Bill is a just transition. Our farmers and food producers must be supported economically, as must other sectors, as we move to reduce emissions so that they can continue to produce high-quality food. As my party colleague and Chair of the AERA Committee, Declan McAleer, has stated, the agriculture sector also has a key role to play in shaping how we move forward. That must be done in partnership with farmers and our agri-food sector. If the Bill moves beyond Second Stage today, as I hope it will, I, as a member of the AERA Committee, look forward to hearing from the public and all sections and sectors of society as we gather evidence over the next few months.

As has been pointed out, the Bill is a framework Bill. If it becomes law, the climate action plans that emanate from it, and which will, in five-year time frames, detail the actions required to reduce greenhouse gases within the time frames, will be laid before the Assembly. They will not have effect unless they are approved by the Assembly. Prior to that, they will be subject to 16 weeks of public consultation. All of that is important.

Climate action is not, nor can it be, something that is done to society. For it to work, it must be something that is agreed and done in conjunction with society. Sinn Féin supports and wants to see a climate Bill that is ambitious, effective, fair, based on science and deliverable. How we move forward, the targets that we set and how we achieve them must be based on the best science available and in conjunction with international targets. The progression of the Bill beyond this stage will allow for that scrutiny and all of the hard work to begin.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I support the Bill at its Second Stage. I thank the sponsors of the Bill and the proposer, my constituency colleague Ms Clare Bailey, for bringing it forward. The Bill emerges from a cross-community,

non-partisan initiative, and it reflects the real climate emergency ahead of us. It is not an issue on which we can do what the Assembly so often does, namely engage in endless delays or an internal process of lots of talk but no action. The Bill is already the product of well-defined expert input. If we cannot proceed based on a clear emergency and well-defined expert input, when can we proceed?

As others have mentioned, we are in the peculiar position of having two climate change Bills in development, with the other coming from the Department. This means that bringing forward this Bill has led to the Department also taking action, and that is good. We are supporting the passage of this Bill on the basis that a challenging climate change Act should exist in Northern Ireland, but we are also content to scrutinise all relevant options to achieve that. Whatever way we end up with a climate change Act, I hope that the legitimate concerns of the agri-food sector, represented by the Ulster Farmers' Union, sectoral lobbyists and others will be taken into account.

In our 'Green New Deal' paper published recently, the Alliance Party put forward proposals for enabling and supporting a transition, including support for nature-friendly farming. Those proposals will complement this Bill, but it should also be emphasised that they are essential to the success of any such legislation. That is not to say that we should not set challenging targets. On the contrary, we should, but we should also emphasise that some sectors will need support to enable us to deliver on them.

It is also important to note that our intention is not to focus on the fear factor. Indeed, I argue that sometimes the fear factor plays too great a role in these debates and can end up turning people off. On the contrary, as my party established in its 'Green New Deal' policy paper last month, the challenge in tackling climate change can be hugely engaging and positive. It is not just about avoiding an emergency ahead but about creating opportunity. Nor is it just about the environment but about how we proceed with greater fairness in everything, from the provision of social care to the delivery of economic livelihoods. Those who engage in denial are not just denying the obvious impact of rapid climate change but denying social and economic opportunity to a much wider number of people.

Since those at the more sceptical end of this debate tend to come from the unionist Benches, I will also add that there is a significant UK success story here. The decline in carbon emissions is one thing at which the UK is genuinely and clearly world-beating. However, Northern Ireland has not contributed anything like its fair share towards that reduction in carbon emissions. Let us now ensure that Northern Ireland plays its full part in that success into the future, proofing policy to ensure that it is a leader in tackling climate change and grasping the opportunities which emerge from doing so.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Bradshaw:** Yes.

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Member accept that the decision that Kilroot coal-fired generation is to cease in 2024 will make a major contribution to the reduction of carbon emissions?

**Ms Bradshaw:** All opportunities to make our economy more green are to be welcomed.

I am concerned that some of the targets in the Bill are being presented as restrictive when, in fact, they are means of developing opportunities. This is more relevant to Northern Ireland than anywhere else because of our ongoing reliance on the subvention and the need to create our own wealth to reduce that reliance. What better way than to become a world leader in sustainable development and sustainable economics? The costs that some referred to could be turned into a net benefit.

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Bradshaw:** Yes.

**Mr Poots:** With regard to sustainable economics, does the Member have evidence to challenge what the Climate Change Committee is suggesting: that we would need to wipe out over 50% of our beef and dairy herds? Does she understand that agri-food employs 100,000 people and generates £5 billion for our economy? If we do not listen to what the Climate Change Committee is saying, we will put ourselves in a position where tens of thousands of people who work in the agri-food sector will be out of jobs. Can she give some evidence to challenge the Climate Change Committee about where these economics are coming from to sustain what she has just said?

**Ms Bradshaw:** The Minister will know that I do not sit on the AERA Committee, I sit on the Health Committee. Our spokesperson sits on that Committee, and they will engage fully in the scrutiny process as people bring forward the information. I mentioned that we are open to engaging. I know that John Blair met the Ulster Farmers' Union and other organisations to look at the issues that they are bringing forward in order to see how they could be mitigated.

I will make a broader comment. There must be no question of meekly returning to the status quo when the pandemic is over. We must grasp the opportunity to reset some of our policies and even assumptions that have proven to be so outdated.

Tackling climate change is not just about the environment, as I said. It is about creating a genuine, fair society with opportunities for all. We want Northern Ireland to be a world leader in green opportunities and innovation in environmentally friendly areas as far-reaching as fintech, where we are already world-leading; renewable technologies and green aerospace, where we have much to build on; and emerging areas in hydrogen deployment and smart materials.

Yet again, we find that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK without legislation in a crucial area. Over a decade since it was put in place elsewhere, we are lagging behind politically on yet another issue. The attitude that we will not be bounced into legislative action is one that condemns us all to lag behind. Is that what we want for Northern Ireland?

It is time to lead, it is time to legislate and it is time to grasp the opportunities of a green new deal that is supported by the Bill.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I support the Climate Change Bill in all its parts.

No one can overstate or overestimate the magnitude of the climate problems that we collectively face. Decarbonising our economy requires action right across most of our

lives and will impact on every industry, including power, agriculture and travel, to name but a few.

Amid the vast number of issues impacted by climate change, I want to look at one to illustrate the importance of the task at hand. I want to discuss one of the biggest challenges of all, and that is heating our homes. According to the Department for the Economy's draft energy strategy, we need to retrofit 50,000 homes a year in Northern Ireland in order to make them energy efficient so that we can meet our net zero obligations by 2050.

Unfortunately, the strategy says very little about how to do that, and the Finance Minister's Budget says even less. Retrofitting homes to make them energy efficient is a massive challenge. Many of our homes leak heat. Many do not have cavity wall insulation and much of the existing cavity wall insulation is old and needs replacing. Windows need replacing, insulation needs to be installed, dry lining needs to go on walls and, of course, the heating systems need to be replaced, ending a reliance on the fossil fuels of oil and gas. That is an expensive set of improvements. On average, it is likely to cost in and around £20,000 per home. In some homes, it will cost up to £50,000, yet some of the homes in my constituency of Derry have a market value of £80,000 or less. Those figures should give us all a little bit of food for thought.

Then we have the vast number of privately owned rented homes. Some of them are in much worse condition. Yet there is precious little sign that Departments, their officials and, sadly, the Ministers have got to grips with the scale of the challenge. So, I congratulate the Irish Government, which are expected to announce plans very shortly under which homeowners will have access to state-backed loans in order to make properties energy efficient.

In place of a realistic solution, our Department for the Economy seems to have adopted a policy of hope and delay. The draft energy strategy includes many optimistic references to the use of green hydrogen to heat our homes. Not everyone listening to the debate will know the difference between green and blue hydrogen. I admit, hands up, that I was one of those people not so very long ago, so let me explain.

Green hydrogen is produced from renewable electricity, but the process is not energy-efficient, because much of the energy value is lost in the process of converting electricity to hydrogen. It is clean, however. On the other hand, blue hydrogen uses electricity from fossil fuels, which is neither energy-efficient nor clean, unless the carbon that is emitted is captured and stored, but the Department for the Economy says that our landscape is not suited to carbon capture and storage.

### 5.15 pm

Theoretically, hydrogen could replace natural gas in homes that are connected to the gas network. That option is currently favoured by gas companies. Remember that there have been numerous complaints, including in the University of Exeter report, that the gas industry has been too influential in making energy policy in Northern Ireland. At present, the use of hydrogen on this scale is largely theoretical, without evidence that it can work on the scale required. Nor do we have the scale of renewable electricity that is necessary to dedicate much of it to the production of green hydrogen to replace natural gas.

Britain is looking to replace its natural gas, but Northern Ireland continues to invest heavily in the gas network, with £66 million of financial support coming from the Government in recent years to expand the network in Northern Ireland. Although natural gas emits less carbon than oil — I will give it that — it remains a serious carbon emitter, and it is a fossil fuel. That is why England is seeking to make significant progress in moving away from the use of natural gas over the next four years. Despite that, the Northern Ireland Minister for the Economy seems to be giving serious consideration to new gas exploration and extraction in Fermanagh, and the Utility Regulator still has a statutory duty to promote gas as an energy source while not having a duty to promote energy efficiency. Frankly, all of that is quite unbelievable.

I will certainly support the Bill today, but the Bill and our vote mean nothing unless our Ministers act much faster than they have until now. That means that the Minister for Communities must ensure that the Housing Executive and housing associations have realistic and achievable plans for retrofitting our social housing stock. Her Department's programmes should stop financing the replacement of oil boilers with gas boilers. The same is true of the Economy Minister. To cut not only carbon emissions but fuel poverty, the focus must be on energy efficiency. The Economy Minister must, with the backing of the whole of the Executive, come forward with proposals to retrofit homes across all tenures, as well as proposals for financing that retrofitting. Those conversions will need to use technologies that work, such as heat pumps, district heating schemes, solar panels and the electrification of heating systems backed by energy efficiency improvements.

Tackling the climate crisis is one of the most difficult tasks that faces our Administration, but none is more urgent or important.

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for giving way. She might have moved on from the Ministers, which is why I asked her to do so. I have corresponded with the Minister for Infrastructure — indeed, I have spoken to her on at least two occasions separately from that — about trying to press ahead with getting more charging points for electric cars. Of course, electric cars are much more widely available now, and 45% of our electricity is produced from renewable sources. Utilising that energy for electric cars would be a superb thing to do. Can the Member indicate whether she includes the Infrastructure Minister and whether she will press her to accelerate the availability of charging points throughout Northern Ireland, thereby encouraging investment in electric vehicles by the general public?

**Ms McLaughlin:** Thank you for your intervention, Minister. This is a cross-departmental crisis. Every single Minister has a duty to implement changes that will help to decarbonise our economy. I, too, have concerns about charging points, and I have spoken and written to the Minister for Infrastructure about that. It is a cross-departmental issue.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Member for giving way. Maybe the Minister was not here when I mentioned it, but I proposed earlier that the just transition group should be cross-departmental and, in fact, should address issues such as transport, energy, the economy and social

consequences, including infrastructure. I know that he has talked to the Minister about that issue.

**Mr Beggs:** First, I declare that I own 25 acres of agricultural land that I let out, and I also provide voluntary assistance to my parents on their farm.

From the outset, I indicate my support for Northern Ireland playing its part in enabling the United Kingdom to reach net zero carbon and achieve zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. I recognise that that will be painful for many sectors, and there will be challenges in getting there. The EU also aims to be climate-neutral by 2050 and appears to be moving towards legislation. Most farmers to whom I talk recognise that our climate is changing, and many recognise that action is required. Recently, I picked up a comment from one farmer, who basically said that the tap is either fully on or fully off. That reflects what we have been experiencing, and that causes difficulty for us all.

I say that to acknowledge the fact that we have a climate emergency and to indicate my support for the Northern Ireland Assembly legislating to play our part within the United Kingdom, just as the devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales have done. They have already legislated to provide protection. Scotland has had a Climate Change Act since 2009 and recently updated its targets to include a 75% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and 90% by 2040. Scotland is well ahead of us. In 2016, Wales legislated to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and, in February this year, after almost five years of planning and actions, Wales updated its targets, worked out how to do it and is now aiming to achieve net zero by 2050.

I have to ask: why has Northern Ireland not legislated yet? I ask that to the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, indeed, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, who made commitments in NDNA that the Executive would bring forward a climate change Act to give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning. Minister, why has there been such a delay? There has been talk of legislation. When will it be presented to the Executive, and when will the official Bill be published?

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Beggs:** Certainly.

**Mr Speaker:** Sorry, I advise the Member that we are straying into something that is not under debate today.

**Mr Beggs:** I accept the Speaker's comments.

I commend the Member for South Belfast for her private Member's Bill to the degree that it has forced this issue onto the table once more and has provided the increased visibility that the Executive have not delivered as they should have. This Bill sets out ambitious targets over a compressed time frame that are way beyond the UK Climate Change Committee targets.

**Ms Bailey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Beggs:** Certainly.

**Ms Bailey:** Does the Member realise that his party's manifesto commits to net zero by 2035, which is much faster and a much more compressed time frame?

**Mr Beggs:** I believe that that was a Westminster manifesto. It certainly risks delivering an overly painful

shock to our economy and to jobs rather than enabling efficient changes and mitigating the effects of any change.

Clause 2 would force the Executive to bring a plan for net zero. Why does it not simply state that we will follow UK Climate Change Committee recommendations to ensure that Northern Ireland contributes its fair share of greenhouse gas reductions? It indicates a legislative commitment to reach net zero carbon by 2045. We are at least five years behind Wales in legislating, and the Bill proposes that we will miraculously leapfrog other regions in a compressed time frame. I have to ask this: how is that to be achieved without pain?

I urge all Members to read carefully and study the UK Climate Change Committee's letter to DAERA, dated 1 April 2021. It is a serious letter with an unfortunate date, but it was not an April Fool. It is a key letter, of which everyone should be aware, that was in reply to a DAERA official's request in February. In it, the Climate Change Committee states:

*"In December 2050 [sic], we recommended that any climate change legislation for Northern Ireland include a target to reduce all greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 82% by 2050 as part of a fair contribution to the UK Net Zero target in 2050 and our international obligations under the Paris Agreement. This remains our clear recommendation."*

Again, I point out to everyone that there will be pain and cost as a result of legislation. We need to legislate to protect the environment but in a fair and proportionate manner so that our region contributes to the UK's meeting its climate change targets by 2050.

The UK Government are well advanced in their targets to meet the Paris agreement climate change commitments. Some regions are to be net sinks, while others are to be net sources, but the UK as a whole will meet the climate change target set in the Paris Accord. We have to play our part.

This Bill will affect much more than just the agriculture industry. Each region of the UK is different, and all aspects must be taken into consideration. Take electricity generation. In the UK, there are numerous nuclear power stations. I understand that there is, at present, 8 GW of generating capacity in Scotland, Wales and England. There is none in Northern Ireland, however. The other regions of the UK are able to generate electricity without contributing to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Somehow, we have to generate electricity without that. I acknowledge that we have the interconnector with Scotland, and, undoubtedly, some nuclear energy will flow along it. In addition, the UK has significant hydroelectric power installed, with a capacity of 4-7 GW. That includes 2-8 GW of pump storage. Again, where is there significant hydroelectricity in Northern Ireland? The reason that those two forms of electricity generation are particularly important is that they can continue to flow when there is no wind. That issue must be catered for.

Going forward, Kilroot is destined to close, so we will be entirely reliant on gas, which admittedly has lower CO<sub>2</sub> outputs than Kilroot's coal. Nevertheless, there will be a more significant proportion of CO<sub>2</sub> outputs in Northern Ireland. In addition, in other parts of the United Kingdom, there are an extensive number of offshore wind turbines —

I think of the North Sea and Morecambe Bay — and to a degree, when wind does not blow in one area, it may blow in another. We do not have that either, which again may lead to additional energy being produced from gas.

Mention was made earlier of hydrogen production. How will the electricity be generated to generate the hydrogen? That is a significant problem that has not been addressed here. GB has greater options for assisting with generation when there is no wind.

No allowance had been made in our local targets for the fact that that may, in turn, affect the price of electricity for individuals and businesses because additional standby generations may be required and carbon mitigation may need to be purchased to compensate for any such generation.

### 5.30 pm

Others have indicated that the Bill impacts greatly on agriculture and the agri-food sector. Food production in Northern Ireland has a greater greenhouse gas footprint than in the rest of the UK. Northern Ireland agriculture is responsible for 27% of our greenhouse gas emissions; in the rest of the UK, the figure is only 10%. The UK Climate Change Committee recognised that Northern Ireland's food production for the rest of the UK generates greenhouse gas emissions here. Northern Ireland food production helps to feed the rest of the UK, and the Climate Change Committee has recognised that in assessing a fair limit and target for each area. That is a major factor in why it has not sought 100% greenhouse gas reduction by 2050, never mind by 2045. The Climate Change Committee stated:

*“Our analysis shows that Northern Ireland’s position as a strong agri-food exporter to the rest of the UK, combined with more limited capabilities to use ‘engineered’ greenhouse gas removal technologies, means that it is likely to remain a small net source of greenhouse gas emissions – almost entirely from agriculture – in any scenario where the UK reaches Net Zero in 2050. It is fair that those residual emissions should be offset by actions in the rest of the UK.*

*At this time, our assessment is that a Net Zero target covering all GHGs cannot credibly be set for Northern Ireland. Targets should be ambitious, but must be evidence-based and deliverable with a fair and equitable route map to achieving them.”*

How does the Bill recognise that comment by the UK's Climate Change Committee? How does it take on board that committee's views? I have not heard or seen that.

The committee also highlights that there is a difference in land use and, in particular, that:

*“The livestock sector results in a higher proportion of grassland in Northern Ireland and lower proportion of cropland. Forest coverage is also lower than the rest of the UK at around 8% (including small woodland area), and significant emissions from peatlands mean that land use is currently a much larger net source of emissions in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK.”*

Northern Ireland is starting at a different level and on a different plane and:

*“must plant trees and restore peatland to build a net land use sink over time”.*

**Mr Wells:** I am glad that the Member has given way because the Minister is in the Chamber. Would he accept my point that any tree planting that has a high proportion of Sitka — a foreign exotic species — does nothing for biodiversity or climate change and, therefore, that the vast proportion of planting must be of deciduous trees native to Northern Ireland?

**Mr Beggs:** The Member has introduced an interesting point. I hope that the Minister will respond to it.

The final comment from the UK Climate Change Committee in this section is that the starting point of our land use:

*“means that the total size of the net sink will be smaller in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK by 2050.”*

I think, in particular, of the Minister's recent announcement of 50 hectares of new forest in north Antrim. There was huge cost involved in establishing that. There is cost involved in moving forward. Farmers generally do not have the money up front to convert from agricultural land to forestry. It is hugely expensive, and there is a long wait for that crop to be harvested. Most farmers could not wait for that. There is a cost involved in the change, and we are starting at a different point.

The UK Climate Change Committee has assessed our infrastructure in setting local targets. It highlights the fact that the natural gas network in Northern Ireland is less developed. It talks about our electricity network, existing housing stock, clusters of heavy industry and airport infrastructure. It goes on to comment on our potential to store CO<sub>2</sub>. As I indicated, part of the plan for parts of the rest of the UK is to use carbon capture to get to the zero figure. The Climate Change Committee says:

*“Northern Ireland is less likely to have a major UK CCS cluster by 2050, and therefore does not appear to be the most ideal place to locate greenhouse gas removal technologies.”*

In that can be seen the complexity of the range of issues that we face. It is not a matter of picking a figure that we have to reach; it is complicated.

Carbon capture is planned to play a role in enabling the UK to reach its Paris climate agreement obligations to protect the planet, but our regional figure will not benefit from capture elsewhere. A different allowance was set for Northern Ireland. That has been a contributory factor in the recommendation of the 82% by 2050 target.

The 2045 zero greenhouse gas target is causing huge concern in the rural community. Friends and neighbours have contacted me because they are concerned not only for their current enterprises but for future generations. What money will there be to mitigate all this? Our budgets are already stretched. I suspect that promises of mitigation will be difficult to deliver.

Why do we not legislate for the targets agreed by the UK Climate Change Committee to enable the UK to meet, at least, the Paris Accord 2050 obligations of net zero greenhouse gas emissions? If individual plans demonstrate that we can better them, we can increase our

targets as Scotland and Wales have done. Why have we not learned from them? Is that not a route that we should go down?

One of the most concerning statements in the letter is this:

*"The context of a Net Zero 2050 target for the whole of the UK is also important. Rather than leading to additional overall reduction in UK GHG emissions," —*

wait for it —

*"there is a risk that a Net Zero target for Northern Ireland in the same year or earlier could simply shift a greater share of the UK-wide costs of reaching Net Zero to Northern Ireland."*

The UK is committed to reaching net zero by 2050. If we decide to move ahead of that, as we are at liberty to do, and pick up the cost and the pain, what may happen? The UK may simply reduce the amount of carbon capture that they are planning for other parts of the United Kingdom. We can inflict as much pain as we wish on our agriculture sector and our other industry, affecting jobs, employment and our economy.

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for giving way. One of the issues of most concern to me — it should be shared by the Assembly — is that, if we go down this route and decide that we do not need beef production and dairy production, we will have to get those products elsewhere. I believe that the Member indicated in Committee that we could get them from western Europe and New Zealand, but maybe the Member has not checked her facts and acknowledged that western European production of beef and dairy products has a higher carbon footprint per kilogram than we have in the United Kingdom. Instead of reducing carbon emissions, the Bill, perversely, is potentially raising them by simply diverting the problem, exporting the problem elsewhere and saying, "Haven't we done well, guv?".

**Ms Bailey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Beggs:** I wish to answer the Minister first. I may subsequently give way to the Member. For clarity, the Minister was not referring to me: I am not on the Agriculture Committee. I believe that he was referring to the proposer of the Bill. I will happily give way.

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member.

Minister, at that session of the Committee, when I was asked that question, I was questioning where we could pick up the slack in relation to dairy production and using the New Zealand model. I was not talking about importing from New Zealand; I was saying that it has its own climate Bill and its own measures, and, therefore, to increase its production it would be measured against its existing climate legislation, which is something that we do not have.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Member for her contribution.

There is another interesting quote in the letter from the Climate Change Committee. The letter must be studied by everyone. It is critical to the future agri-food industry in Northern Ireland and the wider economy. It cannot be taken lightly. I stumbled upon it. How many of you have read it? I ask that everyone ensures that they read it, or what they are wishing to achieve may not be achieved. The letter also says:

*"A larger reduction in output from Northern Ireland's livestock sector compared to the rest of the UK. Even our most stretching Tailwinds 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 released" —*

wait for it —

*"is not enough to get Northern Ireland to Net Zero emissions in 2050."*

That is what the UK experts in this field have stated. I am aghast that I have not heard this referred to in the debate so far. It is critical stuff. Another comment is made that reflects what was said earlier by the Minister. There is a risk that:

*"Without a corresponding reduction in consumption of such produce, this would simply shift emissions overseas."*

We can stop producing food here; we can stop encouraging farmers and our agri-food industry; we can lower our carbon footprint; and, at that point, consumers in the UK will take food from elsewhere —.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Beggs:** I will.

**Mr Wells:** I am somewhat confused. My understanding was that the Member's party had signed up be enthusiastic supporters of the Climate Change Bill. Yet, unless I read him wrong — this is a little bit of the kettle calling the pot black — I suspect he is taking almost a solo run here and seems to be picking the Bill apart line by line. He is perfectly entitled to do that, if that is his view, but is he in line with his party's view on the issue?

**Mr Beggs:** I ask the Member to be patient.

There is a real risk of offshoring food production. Will that include other industries? I referred to electricity: if electricity costs go exceedingly high, there is a risk there.

Further, if we move in advance of HMG — this is another important aspect, and I have thought about it — there may not be appropriate carbon tax in place to protect Northern Ireland producers and businesses from competitors overseas. That is a real thing. We can add costs to our local producers and businesses, but will there be protection? I suspect that, at some point, there may be carbon taxes coming in to give a degree of protection and stop unfair competition from the rest of the world, but, if we move ahead of the rest of the United Kingdom, we may not have such protection.

There is a risk that food being sourced from elsewhere in the world could add pain to the local agriculture sector. Will that result in food that has a greater carbon footprint, is perhaps of an even lower quality and has even been produced with lower animal welfare standards compared with our local products? That is the complexity of what we are doing. All those factors must be considered. It is not enough to pick a date and say that we will sort it out by then. This is extremely complex. Some people think that I think too much about things, but I try to get an understanding of where we are and come to a reasonable conclusion.

**5.45 pm**

The Climate Change Committee indicates that going too slowly could lead to unnecessary costs in the future — I agree — and to Northern Ireland missing out on the benefits of the climate investment that takes place elsewhere in the UK. However, going too fast and, in particular, aiming to decarbonise significantly faster than the rest of the UK also poses several risks. Setting emissions reduction targets that are too ambitious to be delivered can undermine their credibility. Going beyond the natural rate of stock turnover and making equipment redundant earlier in its lifetime might lead to the premature scrapping of assets such as vehicles and boilers. That may be costly, it risks undermining popular support for transition and would cause increased embedded emissions. If we scrap equipment early and before the end of its normal lifespan, guess what? We are adding to emissions and costs.

For all those reasons, I cannot support the Bill. In summary, I want a climate change Act for Northern Ireland that is proportionate and fair. Having listened to the contributions so far, I remain concerned that the proposals that are being made are in danger of placing unrealistic requirements on people. I call for common sense. As part of the UK, we must do our bit to protect the planet. I support the 82% reduction in emissions by 2050. I have no doubt that that will be very challenging and painful. It is not a pain-free option, but I recognise that, in playing our part to effect climate change, we must do it. That is why I support playing our part in the United Kingdom.

The UK has targets for carbon capture, and we cannot be part of that. Lots of complex issues are involved here. I urge Members not to be attracted by a simple figure or headline. We need to understand all the knock-on effects. As I said, for that reason, having assessed all the information and looked carefully at the Bill and the Climate Change Committee's detailed letter of, I think, 18 pages, I cannot support the Bill.

**Mr Allister:** The easiest thing in politics is to follow the crowd. I do not intend to follow the crowd on the Bill, and I am glad that Mr Beggs does not either, nor, might I add, do I intend to follow the crowd of unionist leaders who are abandoning the leadership of their parties. *[Laughter.]* However, when you come to this subject, you find that the communal pressure that builds towards supporting a Bill such as this draws so heavily on hysteria and whipping up fears that there comes a point when it loses its traction with credibility. Some of the cheerleaders for the proposition that there will be the Apocalypse if we do not pass the Bill would take us down that road. Of course, I remind the House that some of the past cheerleaders of the same lobby told us that, by today, we would all be dead and gone because of the horrible things that would happen.

Al Gore. Remember him? Back in 2006, he told us that the world had 10 years to avert a true planetary emergency. In 2009, he reckoned that there was a 75% chance that the North Pole would be ice-free in five to seven years. In 1989, a UN official said:

*"entire nations could be wiped off the face of the Earth by rising sea levels if the global warming trend is not reversed by the year 2000."*

In an earlier intervention, I quoted the executive director of the UN environmental programme, who, 39 years ago, said that there would be by the turn of the century:

*"an environmental catastrophe which will witness devastation as complete, as irreversible, as any nuclear holocaust."*

The same genre of people today tell us that the Apocalypse is upon us.

I acknowledge that there is climate change. There always has been climate change. Over the millennia, our climate has changed time and time again. It is changing now, but, frankly, I will take a lot of convincing that it is all because of belching cows or industry or anything of that nature. Yet, on the back of that, we are told that we must do this and that, if we do not, we are doomed.

What is it that we are being asked to do? Very often, when a Bill is published, the first thing that I reach for is the explanatory and financial memorandum (EFM), to see what it is all about. Yes, I will read the Bill, but I want to see what its proponents are saying. This explanatory and financial memorandum is the most audacious but vacuous document that I have read in a long time. It is audacious in the sense that it tells us that Climate Coalition Northern Ireland represents over 390,000 people. This afternoon, the Chair of the Agriculture Committee had the number at over 400,000. Interestingly, if you go to the website of the Climate Coalition and look up its membership, you will find that 26 individuals belong to it, along with all sorts of corporate bodies and institutions. How the coalition gets to 390,000 — that creative and fictional figure — is just not explained. If you go to its website — I will do it live — and click on the button to support its petition in favour of the Bill, you will discover that 1,559 people have signed the petition that the mass-followed coalition has produced — 1,559. This morning, it was 1,558. We need to be more careful with some of the propaganda that is being ushered out on the matter.

When reading the section of the explanatory and financial memorandum that deals with the Bill's background, I asked myself, "What will it say about the Climate Change Committee's report?". The explanatory and financial memorandum was published on 22 March. By then, the first letter from the Climate Change Committee to the Minister, which was written in December, had been on the CCC's website for three months. The background does not even mention it. There is not a single reference in this EFM to the Climate Change Committee and the letter that it wrote. Mr Beggs has dealt very fully with it. That means that I need not deal as fully with it, but it is a very illuminating document. It tells us that:

*"Achieving net-zero GHG emissions for the whole of the UK by 2050 does not necessitate that every sector or area of the UK reaches absolute zero emissions by that date. Some parts of the UK will be 'net sources' of greenhouse gases by 2050 with emissions offset in other parts of the UK that are 'net sinks'."*

It records how much we are relied on in the UK as a food producer and that we are a net exporter with nearly 50% of all agri-food products going from Northern Ireland to GB, and, therefore, it is right that we should have the benefit of the sinks that are elsewhere.



The letter goes on to be very clear, as Mr Beggs expounded, that a consequence of forcing net zero on Northern Ireland is:

*“A substantial reduction in output from Northern Ireland’s livestock farming”.*

That is why it says that, by 2050, for Northern Ireland, to get the whole UK to where it needs to be, 82% is sufficient, but it is not sufficient for those who drive the Bill. They want us to go ahead of everyone else and, by 2045, have a 100% reduction, and all that with no regard to what it would do to our primary industry in Northern Ireland. The proposer of the motion managed to make a speech, and, unless I missed it, did not once mention agriculture, yet agriculture is the very foundation of our economy.

Someone said in the debate that the Bill does not set targets for agriculture. I am sorry, but agri-food is identified in clause 3(6)(i) and clause 3(7)(h) on sectoral plans. Sectoral plans inevitably will include targets, so the Bill anticipates setting sectoral plans with targets for our agri-food industry.

We have all had many lobby letters on this subject — rightly so — but probably the one that encapsulated for me the threat came from the Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association. Let me read a couple of paragraphs from it because I have not heard them countered in this debate:

*“The private Member’s Bill proposed by the Green Party will be devastating to the agri-food sector. It will reduce the value of the livestock sector by more than 50% — taking around £1 billion per annum out of the rural economy, leading to rural depopulation and a major loss of export earnings. There will be a loss of up to 50,000 jobs in the processing and supply industries which will devastate the NI economy ...*

*The private Member’s Bill currently proposed is ill-considered and irresponsible. It ignores the UK Climate Change Committee’s advice which recognises the much greater importance of agriculture in Northern Ireland and that much of the food produced here is consumed in Great Britain. It also flies in the face of the excellent work carried out by our expert scientists and researchers in DAERA and AFBI and the reality is that the measures will contribute nothing to the global environment or to the challenge of feeding a growing population. The inevitable outcome of this policy is that the UK requirement for meat and dairy will simply be imported from regions where emissions are higher, and animal health and welfare standards are much lower than in Northern Ireland.”*

That sounds pretty irrefutable. I have heard no one in the debate refute it: no one.

## 6.00 pm

People have spoken out of both sides of their mouth in the debate. They have said, “Oh, we’re going to look after the farming sector. We’re going to consult. We’re going to make sure that these things don’t happen”. It is clear what will happen if the Bill is enacted. You cannot proclaim, for the sake of your constituency, that you will protect your farming community if you troop through a Lobby tonight to vote for something that will devastate your farming community. That is the reality that we face in the debate.

I remind the House of a point that I made in an intervention: the targets set cannot be reduced. We are told, “Oh, things can be reviewed” and, “We can look at things as we go along”. There are some things that you cannot look at. Clause 11(2) is clear:

*“the Executive Office must not propose any alteration which has the effect, whether directly or indirectly, of lowering any target under section 3(2) ... from the level approved by the Assembly under section 2(3) ... when the corresponding climate action plan was so approved.”*

There is no second chance under the Bill to rescue a sector that you will so wantonly devastate. You cannot reduce the targets.

Another point that I want to talk about is the powers that the Bill creates. Clauses 5 and 6 and the relevant appendix create a Northern Ireland climate office and a Northern Ireland climate commissioner, and staff will be appointed by the commissioner. There is no limit on the number of staff whom the commissioner can appoint; indeed, there is no refusal of the House to approve the expenditure, because it is to be done under the Assembly Commission and the Assembly Commission’s budget is not alterable by the House. It is not something with which the House can tinker. Once it gets through the Audit Committee, it follows inevitably. By putting it under the Assembly Commission, the House is signing a blank cheque for the cost of the Northern Ireland climate office and the commissioner. The Bill tells us that salaries can be paid as high as the highest salary in the Civil Service. What is that? About £170,000 or £180,000? We truly are signing a blank cheque with the Bill. Once we give the function to the commissioner to appoint his or her staff, the Assembly Commission must do it. It becomes part of the Assembly Commission’s budget and is beyond our reach. A blank cheque is what the House is being asked to sign in respect of the Bill.

Of course, under clause 6, the commissioner can acquire property. I invited the sponsor to tell us what it meant, but she did not oblige. I will read clause 6(8) again:

*“The Climate Commissioner may do anything (including acquire or dispose of property or rights) which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to, the discharge of the functions of the Climate Commissioner.”*

I asked, “What does it mean that the climate commissioner can do anything, including disposing of rights?”.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** The Member is, perhaps, one of the most experienced parliamentarians in the Building. He knows what will happen, because it is what happened to his two private Member’s Bills. The Bill will go to the Committee, which will be diligent in teasing out all his concerns. No doubt, when it comes back from the Committee, there will be significant changes to what we have before us at the moment. I also suspect that he, using his expertise, will table amendments at Consideration Stage if he is not happy. He has concerns, and those will be dealt with at that stage. The Bill will come back, and he will have ample opportunity to scrutinise and amend it accordingly. He certainly has the ability to do that.

**Mr Allister:** Well, of course, the much better option is not to let it get to Committee. It is so flawed and its potential so disastrous that it would be far better for the House to take courage and refuse it.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mr Wells:** The honourable Member for North Antrim needs to come clean. Does he believe that man has any role in the climate change disaster that we face? If he does not believe that and believes that it is just a natural occurrence, he is right: there should be no Bill, because there is no crisis. Is that where he stands?

**Mr Allister:** I have made it plain: I accept that we should all want to leave the planet in better shape than we found it, but I will not be swept along by the hysteria that climate change has never happened before and is happening now only because we have too many animals or too many factories or too many cars. Climate change happened long before we had cars or anything else. Climate change happens, and the profligate use of resources, I have no doubt, can add somewhat to it. However, it is not the primary cause. Natural cycles of climate change happen. That does not take away from us our obligation to do what is right but not to do what is foolish.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** Yes.

**Mr Beggs:** I am not sure exactly what the Member is saying, but does he not accept that, since the time of the Industrial Revolution, there has been considerably more CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere and that there is science involved in how that can adversely affect the climate?

**Mr Allister:** I do not think that I have denied that. However, I am saying that the answer is not to take 50% of our animals and slaughter them or to take 50% of our production and export it to the depleting rainforests of Brazil and then sit back smugly and say, "Didn't we do well?". That is the ethos of the Bill. People, much as Mr Wells might not like it, will continue to buy meat. Do they buy the meat produced in north Antrim or the meat produced on land that has been stripped in the Amazon basin? That is an issue that politicians in the Western world have to consider. Therefore, I say to the House that the Bill is, as the Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association, I think, described it, ill considered.

I am seeking to illustrate that, in some of its powers, it is extreme. It is full of staff. There is no limit on staff and no ability to control the expenditure. What of the Northern Ireland block grant? Where do you think that money is coming from? It is coming out of the block grant. Of course, the Bill also includes the right to pay incentives. On the powers of the commissioner, clause 10 gives sweeping powers to the commissioner to compel the delivery of information. That is a largely unaccountable person being endowed with those huge capacities.

I come back to this point about clause 6(8) that I was distracted from: what are the rights that a commissioner thinks they can dispose of? Here we are in the House, saying that we will all sit back and be perfectly content that a commissioner whom we cannot remove from office unless there is a two-thirds majority and who can be appointed in perpetuity every five years, which conflicts

poorly with international standards, will be given powers to "dispose of property or rights" in a sector that is dominated by the private sector. Are we serious? Maybe, before the debate ends, somebody will tell me what clause 6(8) means and, if I am wrong, put me right.

On the question of cost, what a farce. When you go to the explanatory and financial memorandum to get an insight into what the policy in the Bill will cost, you are told this:

*"It has not been possible to precisely cost either of the above implications",*

those being the costs and the actions taken under the action plans. You are being asked again to sign a blank cheque. The cost of the office has no cap, and the commissioner can be as highly paid as anyone in the Civil Service. They can acquire property: clause 6(7). They can issue financial incentives: clause 3(7). I remind the House that, no matter how punitive and unworkable all this ultimately turns out to be, you cannot, because of clause 11(2), reduce the targets.

I say to the House, although it will not heed me — most Members, I dare to say, not having read the Bill and not having read the Climate Change Committee's letter, will still troop through the Lobby to set on its way legislation that will devastate much of our basic industry and write a blank cheque — that that is not the right way go.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Gerry Carroll. I remind Members that the Minister will be called by 7.00 pm at the latest. I ask Members to be mindful of their contributions because others want to contribute.

**6.15 pm**

**Mr Carroll:** The Polish socialist Rosa Luxemburg said over 100 years ago that we are faced with a choice of overhauling the system in favour of socialism or facing the descent into barbarism. Those words have been repeated countless times since, but I think that it would be hard to imagine a scenario about which that phrase could more aptly be applied than to the climate crisis facing our planet today. The crisis that we face ultimately has its roots in capitalism: in pillaging, burning and aggressively extracting from our earth at a ceaseless rate to feed an ever-growing profit drive, regardless of the consequences for the environment. Those who bear the most responsibility sit at the top of society, raking in said profits while shaping a narrative that all individuals share the responsibility for a crisis of their making. The failure of Governments or, more realistically, the complicity of Governments around the world has fuelled rising temperatures, uncontrollable gas emissions and the resulting weather catastrophes that harm the most vulnerable.

That is the context under which this Bill was written, and, in that context, I think that it is important. Unlike Mr Beggs, I do not think that it goes far enough, to be frank. I agreed to co-sign and support the Bill because it is a start, locally, to challenging climate change, and I remain utterly unconvinced that Ministers in the Executive would take even these introductory measures if left to their own devices. We must see the rise in emissions, the use of fossil fuels and plastic, and environmentally damaging practices as being directly connected to the rise of capitalism, particularly the neoliberal version of the past 40 to 50 years. Environmental breakdown and inequality are

essential to both. I know that that may sound like sacrilege to some in this House, but, unless we point this out, many of the aims of the Bill and our ability to effectively challenge the climate crisis in society at large will likely be unachievable.

I welcome the role of a climate commissioner in this Bill. An independent scrutineer of our environmental efforts will be vital to hold us to the aim of targeting the big polluters and reducing emissions. People today can be jailed for non-payment of TV licence fees but major corporate polluters — people who are serial emitters and destroyers of our natural environment who ignore and breach environmental regulations — are likely to be given licences, grants and, in many cases, even protection from the police when challenged. This must change, and the climate commissioner must be allowed to work without political or business interference.

I also welcome the focus in this Bill on a just transition. We know beyond doubt that the climate crisis hurts those at the bottom of society the most, and, through intervention, the most vulnerable must be assisted as we move towards a more eco-orientated society. I think that, in order to stick to the principles of a just transition, there are a number of priorities that we must adopt, whether through the process of this Bill or future Bills, and these are issues that movements around the world are calling for.

The first is the democratisation of planning and the economy. That would allow us to put the needs of communities and the environment first when making key decisions about resources. It should not be limited to housebuilding, although that is clearly important. We need to talk about democratising the planning and the funding of food and transport as well. Take food: we have supermarkets planning how to fill their stores, what food production lines they use and what quality to bulk buy, all on the basis of maximising profit. The system is intrinsically linked to the production of food on the basis of profit rather than need, and this generates waste, destroys the natural earth and often produces huge amounts of emissions, particularly methane. To tackle this, we need to see farmers enabled to produce more sustainably and financially supported to do so. Small farmers in particular do not benefit from the current system, as many have maybe ducked the question. As Mike Davis has noted, the problem occurs:

*“because the world market misallocates crop production (beef over grain) and fails to deliver basic income to small producers and farmworkers.”*

Through a just transition to sustainable production, we can see that change.

Unfortunately, big producers and even some Members in this House would rather see us separate out the issue of agriculture and methane production. That is thoroughly unambitious and undermining. We need to look at the figures: 25% of human greenhouse emissions come from agriculture, food production and deforestation, and this kind of agriculture capitalism is, ultimately, failing workers as well as the planet. The UN has stated that feeding a world population of 9.1 billion people will require the raising of food production by around 70% from 2005 levels. Clearly, this will lead to a massive spike in emissions and has to be addressed. In doing so, we have to separate the interests of the small and medium farmers from those big

food production plants which, ultimately, have an interest in keeping things as they are.

I find it galling that some expressed faux concern about farmers while supporting or saying nothing about the Minister's plan to scrap the Agricultural Wages Board, which provides some protection for those workers. Workers on the food production line have been failed time and time again. Notably, they have suffered higher rates of COVID infection. They are paid extremely low wages and reports of conditions, particularly for migrant workers, say that they leave a lot to be desired. Importantly, we need a just transition for them as well.

Ultimately, we need a new system that includes farmers, food producers and workers and is one that puts the needs of communities at its centre. That would capture the spirit and idea of a just transition, which is in the Bill. A just transition must also extend to the creation of a greener economy that creates jobs by building public homes that are fit for purpose, extending carbon sinks and re-wetting bogs. Homes, jobs and a healthier environment: tick, tick, tick. However, it is that kind of break that threatens private developers, big extractors and those who do well in society as it is. That is where we get the resistance and lobbying.

Any Government worth their salt would have made a start already on what is in the Bill. They would have written an environmental charter for companies that forces them to adhere to zero carbon and emission reductions. They would have broken with their addiction to roads and cars already, forced pension funds to disinvest from destructive fossil fuel companies or else risk operating illegally and tackled many more issues.

It is worth pointing out that the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the idea that the state does not or cannot intervene in areas of health or provide support to communities and workers. Leaving aside how many people fell through the cracks or how slowly some actions were implemented, the state intervened and implemented measures, and that puts it up to those who argue for and support a Thatcherite, small-state vision of society and the further privatisation of public services etc. If a state can intervene in the middle of a global pandemic to provide some level of protection and support, what justification can there be for a lack of intervention to prevent further descent towards climate catastrophe, which will threaten the lives and health of our communities, those of millions of people across the world and, ultimately, our ability to survive into the future? How many livelihoods could be improved or even saved with such an approach?

Ultimately, I do not think that this or any Bill will force the hand for action, but these are important, though limited, steps in the right direction. We know what it will take: an almighty shift on the streets to break politicians, with their reckless record in Stormont.

I support the Bill, and I extend my solidarity to the school students; XR activists; all those people in the Climate Coalition; everyone who has stood up to protect the environment recently and over the last number of years; all those campaigning against Dalradian Gold in Tyrone; those campaigning for action around the Mobuoy dump; residents in my constituency campaigning to address the issues emanating from the Mullaghglass site; and the many more campaigns both on this island and across the world.

**Mr McGrath:** In supporting the Second Reading of the Climate Change Bill, I pay tribute to those Members from most of the parties who brought it to the House and to all the organisations and groups that helped to shape the Bill that we have before us.

We must make no mistake about this: regardless of flag, language or even the Northern Ireland protocol, that which we discuss today will be the defining debate of our generation. None of us can shy away from the discussion, because all of us will be affected by the outcome of our deliberations and the impact that the Bill has on the world around us.

Climate change is real, it is happening and has been happening for some time. The stark reality is that, unless we act now, we will doom future generations to a world that has been irreversibly infected by the deadly effects of climate change.

Action must be taken now, and it must stem from the House. Leadership must lead and should not be afraid to do so. Such leadership must be proactive and consistent. Doing the bare minimum is not enough.

That was evidenced last year when, upon taking up the ministerial portfolio for Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon MLA invested in an eco-friendly ministerial car and zero-carbon public transport, delivered new cycle lanes, invested in climate-friendly street lighting and created a £20 million blue-green infrastructure fund. She has clearly set the benchmark for other Ministers to follow.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGrath:** I normally would, but we are really pushed for time, and you have had enough time.

The Bill that is before us has clear objectives. The overarching objective is to achieve net zero emissions in Northern Ireland by 2045 at the latest. It places a duty on the Executive Office to bring forward a climate action plan within three years; and it proposes the establishment of a Northern Ireland climate office and commissioner to set the targets — in doing so, they will be free from political interference — and to monitor their effectiveness. I am under no illusion that those will be ambitious targets to meet, but, frankly, I do not see ambitious targets as a justifiable reason for some to object to the Bill. If we are bold enough to set the aspirations for our response to climate change at the highest level, and we follow through on those, we will cease to lag behind the rest of these islands. Potentially, we will become the benchmark for other regions to follow.

I appreciate that many have concerns about the Bill. Certainly, enough of my constituents have contacted me to that effect. South Down is, after all, a predominantly rural constituency with many agricultural heartlands. Farming and fisheries are part of the lifeblood of South Down and make an essential contribution to the economic success of the North. As in other coastal constituencies, coastal erosion is a major issue in South Down, and we have seen the significant destruction of our natural coastline and its hinterland.

More recently, we saw the immediate impact of climate change, with further wildfires across the Mourne. Once, these wildfires were happening every four or five years; now they take place every year, sometimes numerous times. Tragically, it has been pointed out to me that

because our dry seasons are becoming drier and longer, we could soon witness wildfires in Ireland on the scale of those witnessed recently in Australia. Something needs to change, and I am glad that we will have the opportunity to have a further discussion tomorrow.

I heard the concerns of local farmers and those in our agri-food industry. They stated that they are ready and willing to do their bit in the fightback against climate change, but they want their voices to be heard and their valid concerns to be listened to. It is of the utmost —.

**Ms S Bradley:** I appreciate the Member giving way, as I have not had an opportunity to speak on this very important Bill. There appears to be a perception that we are voting on the final Bill. Will the Member join me in putting on record that this is the Second Stage of a Bill to put in place a framework that will feed into action plans?

I encourage the farmers who have been in contact with my office and the Member's office to engage in that process. The farmers in South Down, like farmers everywhere, are in the most privileged position to effect change and to ensure that farming is sustainable in the long term.

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Member for her contribution. It is great to hear a range of voices from South Down, rather than the same one. If we reflect on some of the other contributions that we heard, in which the Bill was taken clause by clause, we would almost feel that we were voting on the final Bill. Of course, as the Member points out, it is only the principles of the Bill that we will vote on, and there will be many opportunities to engage and help to shape the Bill as it moves forward.

As the Bill progresses, it is of the utmost importance that those people are listened to and that government works with them and does not leave them behind. Although there are valid concerns about potential job losses as a result of the Bill, we must remember that it presents opportunities for growth in the green and sustainability sectors. We will need to see the development of a just transition. That element will be critical.

Perhaps the loudest voice in the ongoing debate has been that of young people. Of everything that we discuss in this place, climate change is the issue that will determine the story of their future. The start of that story has already been written. However, we still have an opportunity to write our contribution and smooth the way forward for future generations. The alternative is to kick the can down the road and leave the fight to the next generation.

Years from now, when most of us lie in scorched-earth graves, our next generation will be left to step out into polluted air in which every breath is contaminated, and every step in the sunlight is a step closer to skin cancer. They will rightly ask why the Assembly did not act when it had the chance. Should that awful day come, we will not be excused for that, and rightly so. The next generation will not forgive or forget. The time is always right to do what is right, and that time is now.

Doing the basics will not cut it any more. It is time to right the wrongs of the past and bring forward an ambitious and bold legislative framework to deliver a zero-carbon society and economy. Every party that seeks to be part of our government must commit to that. The SDLP will not be found wanting. I thank the Member for bringing the Bill

before us. I wish her well with its progress, and I am more than content to support it.

### 6.30 pm

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for his cooperation. I call Andrew Muir. I remind Members that your remarks and the length of your contribution will determine how many more Members will be given an opportunity to speak. The Minister will be called at 7.00 pm sharp.

**Mr Muir:** I am conscious of that, Mr Speaker, so I will try to keep my comments brief. As the Alliance Party infrastructure spokesperson, I want to focus on how the Bill will impact on infrastructure, particularly transport. That said, the Bill is long overdue, and the need for legislation is clear.

There is much to commend about the Bill as it stands. There is a need for Northern Ireland-specific emission reduction targets, regular reporting on emission reductions and independent monitoring. As has been outlined recently and throughout the debate, this is the start of the passage of the Bill. We are at Second Stage. There will be Committee Stage, Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage, as Mr Allister is aware. This is part of an engaging and iterative process.

I particularly welcome the focus on short-term targets. It is all too easy for politicians to promise emission reduction targets for more than 20 years down the line, safe in the knowledge that they will not, perhaps, be about to see them through. To make the long-term targets real, they need to be combined with short-term targets and measures for which the Bill provides. Often, when we debate matters in the Assembly, it is on a basis of us versus them or right versus wrong. As the Bill passes through the legislative process, I look forward to an evidence-based discussion on the measures included in the Bill, in the knowledge that everyone is agreed on the need to cut emissions and on the fact that that matters.

I welcome the provision for sectoral plans, whereby sectors will focus on how they can reduce their own emissions. Targets are meaningless if they do not have tangible and immediate actions to back them up. Transport accounts for between 16% and 23% of Northern Ireland's emissions. Our average transport emissions per head are higher than those in the rest of the UK, but, perhaps most disturbingly, over the past 20 years, when cars have become cleaner, our transport emissions have grown by 29%. On transport, it is abundantly clear that we are heading in the wrong direction and need to turn around fast.

The Bill legislates for the declaration of a climate emergency, something for which the Assembly voted early last year, and, in reality, something that we have been aware of for much longer. It is one thing to declare an emergency, but it is another to respond as if you are in an emergency. In the past decade, we have improved our public transport network immeasurably and delivered better-quality services and customer experiences, but there is still not enough progress in generating a modal shift from cars to active travel and public transport. As Philip McGuigan outlined, Jonathan Hobbs from NI Greenways recently reported that 25 kilometres of cycling infrastructure has been built over the past five years in the whole of Northern Ireland. Last year, the Minister

for Infrastructure, with the best of intentions, no doubt, pledged to seize the opportunity for a green recovery from COVID-19, yet, more than a year later, we find ourselves deeply frustrated at the pace of change. Active travel made up 2.5% of the Department for Infrastructure's capital budget for last year. For every one person who works in DFI's transport policy division, which includes active travel, more than 40 work in DFI Roads. We want to support the Minister in the bold action that is required in the Department, and the Bill is one key way through which we can kick-start the radical action that is needed to reach net zero emissions for infrastructure. The actions required include the rapid roll-out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure, as the current set-up is a shambles, and the Department for Infrastructure's budget needs to be rebalanced to fund active travel properly and to review concessionary fares in order to get more young people using our rapidly decarbonised public transport network.

Last month, the Alliance Party published its green new deal. It sets out many other measures that we need to take to meet the requirements in the Bill. Although having a walking and cycling champion is welcome, the reality is that it is a role that has simply been added as a duty for another civil servant. If we are to get real about making the modal shift, we need to have an independent, sustainable and active travel champion.

We all know what needs to be done to avert climate catastrophe, and we know that it can be done while growing our economy and creating a fairer and more equitable society. We support the Bill at Second Stage, because it is a key part of the process of making that vision a reality.

**Miss Woods:** It has been said that we are the first generation to feel the impact of climate change and the last generation that can do something about it. Today, the Bill's Second Stage is a historic moment for Northern Ireland. I am not going to go into much detail on the Bill's clauses. The co-sponsors have done that already. It is a historic moment that we need to consider in order to demonstrate our commitment to protecting our children's future and the generations to come.

Year after year, glaciers retreat and polar ice caps melt at a faster rate. Global temperatures keep rising. The science is there, and we all know the importance of listening to the science, especially in the past year. Why have we not been listening to the science that has been staring us in the face for so long? We see more and more extreme weather events and wildfires that destroy everything in their path, and we need to rebalance. A changing climate is not something that is far off in the future, something that is not affecting us or something that we are able to avoid. It is happening right now. It is already affecting energy prices, crop yields, and food and water supplies across the globe. That results in higher prices and food shortages in poorer counties, which leads to political instability, conflict and the mass movement of people. Changing climates are already changing our food systems, and the more common that extreme events become, with a change in rain patterns and land exploitation, the riskier that our food security becomes, which will have a detrimental impact on those on the lowest incomes. There is nothing just about this, and the direction of travel will only further divide and show inequalities.

It does not have to be that way, however. If we show the right leadership today, we can prevent further catastrophe. The next century will be dominated by necessary, ambitious climate mitigation and adaptation. This climate Bill gives Northern Ireland the tools to operate in that changing world. It will bring about the governance, the plans, the targets, the budgets, the expertise, the audits, the reviews, the duties and the commitments that have been missing for far too long. The climate emergency transcends party politics. The climate emergency does not differentiate between political viewpoints. It should unite us all to do something and everything to mitigate its worst effects.

Mr McGuigan said earlier that he is not designated an eco-warrior, but I am, in the very book that we all signed when we became MLAs. I am glad to see cross-party support for this Bill from all designations. Members, do not be fooled by the cynicism of those who have no desire to change or to do things better, because it is for them to continue to stick their head in the sand. Vested interests and denial will not save us from rising sea levels and extreme weather. Genuine partnership and cooperation among scientists, businesses, economic sectors and people will. That is what democracy and good politics looks like, and we must use effective partnerships to secure climate justice. That is exactly what the Bill does.

Many voices will urge us not to do anything too radical. We all know the usual lines that we have heard before, such as, "We need a little more time to consider things", "One mustn't rock the boat too much", "Why spend money on cutting emissions when we are only a tiny part of a huge global economy?" and the old favourite, especially in Northern Ireland with its pointing of fingers, "Sure, what about China?". The whataboutery continues with, "We have more pressing things on at the moment", "Let others do the hard work, and we can follow later" or, "We are just doing fine." Apart from the moral bankruptcy of those arguments and the fact that we are not doing just fine, if we do not invest in a low-carbon just economy now, we will be left behind, and in pretty short order. We must adjust and rethink how we treat our environment and our land and support the agriculture sector, which has been the subject of much of today's focus in the debate, but also other sectors. That is why the principles of the just transition are included in the Bill at clause 3(8) through the sectoral plans, which must:

- "(a) support jobs and growth of jobs that are climate resilient and environmentally and socially sustainable;*
- (b) support net-zero carbon investment and infrastructure;*
- (c) create work which is high-value, fair and sustainable;*
- (d) reduce inequality as far as possible;*
- (e) reduce, with a view to eliminating, poverty and social deprivation".*

For workers in any sector, that should provide reassurance that they will be supported and brought along in the switch to a low-carbon economy. With no carbon targets and incredibly poor environmental regulation, however, the people of Northern Ireland will realise too late that we can no longer compete in the green economy. That will not be

their fault, but ours for failing to provide the leadership that is needed now.

I commend and thank everyone who played their part in getting the Bill to Second Stage: the coalition, the co-signatories and, especially, my party leader and colleague Clare Bailey MLA. There has been an incredible amount of hard work put into this, hardly ill considered, as some have suggested, and there is much more work to do.

I, too, have a few short words for our children and young people. This Bill is for you, for all you young activists out there fighting for your future, demanding better and demanding action rather than just words or politicians paying lip service to your concerns and greenwashing. So, I say, well done, and thank you for protesting. Thank you for lobbying your elected reps. You may not have the ability to vote yet, but you can raise your voice loud and clear. You are engaging with democracy, and you are certainly being heard by us. We are listening, and we, too, are fighting hard so that the world that you inherit will be more secure and prosperous, where the air is cleaner, the land less polluted, and you have happier, healthier lifestyles and live in happier, healthier communities in a more just and equal world.

The time is now for the Assembly to speak with a unified voice to say that we understand the impact of climate breakdown and that we are doing something about it for the sake of those who will inherit the earth long after we are gone. This is not just about commitments made in past political agreements; this is about our shared future. A very wise man once said, "You can't fix the roof when it's raining". This climate Bill will give Northern Ireland the tools to ensure that we are watertight. Join us and fight for your children's future and vote in favour of the Bill.

**Ms Sugden:** I almost feel a bit incompetent following that great speech by Miss Woods.

I support this historic Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill. I also acknowledge the concerns because that, too, is our responsibility. This is primary legislation; it is not prescriptive. It provides a legislative basis and a mandate to build a climate policy. It is a process, not an event. A process that, I hope, will enable stakeholders from all sides of the debate to contribute to and shape that policy.

Clause 1 provides for the declaration of a climate emergency from the date of Royal Assent. It is an acknowledgement that climate change exists, and it fully supports government to address the biggest issue of our time, one that has transcended generations and which will outlive each of us. We owe it to future generations to do what we can to prevent the further decline of our environment and to give children and young people, and those yet to be born, a fighting chance of climate recovery.

Clause 2 relates to the creation of climate action plans, with details to address the challenges of climate change in Northern Ireland. A plan must be laid before the Assembly within three years of enactment of the Bill, and every five years thereafter — a clear path of action. Those plans must be approved by the Assembly and achieve the overriding climate objective of net zero carbon. Scrutiny is the key to democracy. It is not there to undermine; it is there to improve and strengthen.

Clauses 5 to 10 and schedules 1 and 2 establish a Northern Ireland climate office and a Northern

Ireland climate commissioner. It is interesting that the commissioner will be appointed by the Crown, on nomination by the Assembly, to allow maximum independence from government. That is important because it means that politics cannot come into this and that someone is dedicated to taking forward the climate needs of our society. All that demonstrates the Assembly's commitment to addressing climate change.

I represent a rural constituency in East Londonderry. A considerable number of farmers in the area have contacted me to share their concerns. Whether unfounded or not, there is genuine fear in the agricultural sector that they will be disproportionately impacted by the Bill, primarily because, they say, Northern Ireland is a livestock region. They tell me that that is due to our climate — poor weather — and our countryside not being conducive to arable farming because it is hilly and stony. Farmers say that much of our land is only good for grazing. To be honest, I really do not know, and I am not sure about it. However, I will not claim to know more about farming land than farmers do, so it is important that we listen to all stakeholders, if only to reassure them.

#### 6.45 pm

Like other Members, I have spent much time speaking with farmers and groups such as the Ulster Farmers' Union over these past few weeks. They expressed many concerns, but, in fairness, they also acknowledged the need for climate change legislation and argued that they are ahead in trying to find solutions to the climate problems. For example, a farmer in my constituency collects tyres to be reused by being processed into mattresses. He tells me that, as a main method of disposal, the majority of tyres in Northern Ireland will either end up on bonfires or on a very big bonfire across the world. Huge ships collect this waste from Belfast and take the problem elsewhere, despite the fact that a local business offers a local environmental solution. When that farmer presented his idea to statutory agencies, it was dismissed.

In another part of my constituency, a farmer is growing acres of hemp: the wonder crop for a sustainable environment. It loves Northern Ireland's wet climate. It literally grows as if it is a weed. It improves soils, has no emissions and offsets carbon from elsewhere, such as from other industries. Even the licence to grow hemp here is free, but trying to encourage Northern Ireland government and its various agencies to see what is good for them, as well as for Northern Ireland and the environment, is incredibly frustrating.

I say all of that to demonstrate why farmers are nervous about this radical change. As a co-sponsor of the Bill, I believe that this change is good. I want to convey why it is good, but I am sympathetic to those who fear it. I suggest that the issue may be one not of climate action, but rather one of government inaction. It has taken a private Member's Bill, with very little time left in the mandate, to actually do something, because our Government have not done anything. I appreciate that the Department is developing its own legislation, and I genuinely welcome that, but if this private Member's Bill serves only to force the Government to do their job, then I am grateful to all those involved.

It should not be that way, however. The Government need to get a grip on this issue now; I know that, most Members of the House know that and the public knows that. If the Government cannot do it on their own, then this legislation will support them to do it.

I will come back to our stakeholders. It is important, as part of this process, to acknowledge their concerns, if only to reassure them, in the hope that we can strengthen this Bill and, if necessary, shape it to meet the core objective of addressing climate change. It is not in the spirit of the Bill to diminish livelihoods, to decimate the economy, to undermine the security of food supply or to remove the heart of rural communities. Rather, the Bill seeks to encourage collective responsibility for future generations.

I want farmers to contribute to the conversation so that we do not get it wrong and create unintended consequences. I want them to be part of the solution, as they have told me they already are. Can they offset carbon emissions through better countryside management schemes such as replacing all fences with hedgerows, growing out unused land and exploring new crops that are suited to NI's climate so that the net zero target is less challenging to meet than they expect? If we genuinely care about the planet in its entirety, rather than just about our very small corner of it, maybe we should stop exporting our waste. Shipping the issue away on a big boat does not remove the issue; it sends it elsewhere.

That leads me to an interesting concern raised by farmers. By reducing our food production from livestock, do we reduce our supply in spite of static or growing demand? If demand remains consistent, then where does the food come from, if not locally? Do we add to our carbon footprint if we use aeroplanes and other transport to bring it in? I am not sure about the weight of that argument, especially as intensive farming increases and more food is exported out of Northern Ireland, but it is worth exploring. I hope that this legislative process addresses that concern and reassures that significant sector of our economy. Agriculture is a significant part of the economy in Northern Ireland, and it is only fair that we listen to the sector's concerns, if not reassure it.

Ireland is well known for its grass-fed beef and dairy cattle, in contrast to the grain-fed cattle in other parts of the world. I understand that that adds to the issue. That type of farming replenishes the land, and that can help with carbon emissions. If agri-food continues to farm livestock in some form, perhaps there are better ways of doing it. Maybe that model already exists on these islands and people can learn from our model.

Carbon emissions also seem to be a problem for industrial farming, and yet, despite concerns raised over many years, we have encouraged large industrial farms across Northern Ireland, in which the only benefit to farmers is the rent of the land. As a consequence, the overproduction of manure by-product, which our lands can no longer take, is polluting our environment. These issues sit alongside driving down farmgate prices, as industrial farming increases supply with declining demand. If we want to support rural communities, protect farming families and ensure that local produce stays local to ensure security of food supply so that farmers can feed themselves and their families as well as creating a sustainable and fair livelihood, maybe the Bill needs to look at tackling industrial farming.

I will leave it there, but it is important, as I have said a number of times in my contribution, that we listen to these concerns, not to reject the Bill but to try to shape it, improve it and ensure that we get backing from all in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Justin McNulty, and I remind the Member that the Minister will be called no later than 7.00 pm.

**Mr McNulty:** Not my words, but the words of the late Dr Stephen Hawking:

*“One can see from space how the human race has changed the Earth. Nearly all of the available land has been cleared of forest and is now used for agriculture or urban development. The polar icecaps are shrinking and the desert areas are increasing. At night, the Earth is no longer dark, but large areas are lit up. All of this is evidence that human exploitation of the planet is reaching a critical limit. But human demands and expectations are ever-increasing. We cannot continue to pollute the atmosphere, poison the ocean and exhaust the land. There isn't any more available.”*

These are profound words that send a chill down my spine and lay down a challenge to those of us across the globe who are elected to public office to do something about it.

I support the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill and thank Ms Bailey for her work on this issue. The planet is hotter now than it has been for at least 12,000 years, a period spanning the entire development of human civilisation, according to research, and it has not just happened by a force of nature. We, the human race, have caused this, and we, the human race, have a responsibility to change course. It is not too late, and, in the words of Greta Thunberg:

*“I have learned that you are never too small to make a difference.”*

I am of the land and from the land. I was born and reared in rural south Armagh. I am a culchie and proud. I love and cherish the beauty of our natural heritage, our mountains, our landscape, our waterways and our environment. I was reared farming my uncle Patsy and my auntie Roisin's farm. I cannot begin to describe the life lessons that I learned from my upbringing on the farm of my dear uncle, God rest him. I have fond memories of taking in the hay, milking cows, calving, testing, reseeding, dosing, fencing, feeding, tagging, draining, horning, spreading bag stuff, mowing and counting cattle. I do not have such fond memories of covering the silage twice a year. I so miss the feeling of closing the byre door when the milking was finished.

Therefore, I understand and sympathise with farmers who are concerned. They are concerned that their lives and livelihoods will be impacted, but farmers want to play their part. Farmers and every other stakeholder and sector must be involved in shaping the Bill as it progresses, and they must be informed and incentivised on how they can play their part to not only protect the environment but enhance their roles as custodians and stewards of the land. Rewilding, reforestation and species reintroduction must be incentivised or rewarded alongside traditional farming.

That said, the farming piece and the agri-food piece are only two parts of the climate change jigsaw. We all see the

carnage and the damage done to our lands, our ecology and our ecosystems by the activities of the human race. Yes, part of it relates to the over-intensification of farming, but there is also over-industrialisation, traffic, the pollution of our lands and waterways by dumping of waste, the plastification of our daily lives, the dumping of smugglers' fuel waste, the impact of fossil fuels, and the exponential growth and creation of greenhouse gases. The Bill, as it progresses, must engage and encourage a cross-sectoral approach and cross-sectoral responsibility.

As a new dad, I want my son to have the same love, respect and appreciation for the land that I do, and of the sea and the delicate planet that we live on. In 20 or 30 years' time, if he asks me what I did to protect the environment, I want to be able to tell him that I did all I could. I appreciate that this issue is not without contention and that this debate may not be universally welcomed in every part of our community. As I said, I appreciate that there are concerns about lives and livelihoods. I thank all those on both sides of the argument who have contacted me. My team and I will endeavour to respond to each of them individually. However, to me, it is simple: there is no planet B.

We need to do the right thing. We need to work with communities, business and industry in order to change behaviours, practices and policies. We need to be ambitious and to build a collaborative process that brings people, stakeholders and society with us. We all need to think and act differently about what we eat and the way that we produce foods, package food and goods to transport and deal with waste. Putting up a few wind turbines, using reusable water bottles and having more electric charging points for cars, whilst important, will not be enough on their own. I want to educate the Alliance Party Member who does not know about the FASTER project; maybe he should get more up to speed with what is going on on the ground. Small, token measures will not cut through and save our planet.

Climate change is the challenge of our generation. If we are to leave this world a better place, we need to start now. Now is the time. In 20 years' time, saying “would have”, “could have” and “should have” will not have saved our environment.

I want to talk about how impressed I am by the way in which this issue has captivated and activated our young people. I am inspired by their activism, determination and impatience for change in order to make this a better place. They, rightly, see this issue as far more important than identity, culture or tradition, and they firmly challenge us to do more to protect the environment and make change happen.

When I think of our planet and our natural world, I think of Sir David Attenborough, so it is appropriate for me to finish with a quote from him:

*“Young people: They care. They know that this is the world that they're going to grow up in, that they're going to spend the rest of their lives in. But, I think it's more idealistic than that. They actually believe that humanity, human species, has no right to destroy and despoil regardless.”*

The biggest threat to the environment is the belief that someone else will save it. We all must save it.



**Mr Poots:** I want to begin by highlighting, once more, that I have developed policy proposals for a balanced and evidence-based climate change Bill, but I have not been able to discuss them at the Executive, despite the fact that I have been seeking to get them on the agenda since 24 March. Once the proposals are tabled at the Executive and agreement is secured to proceed, I can quickly move to introduce the right climate change legislation for Northern Ireland, which delivers on the New Decade, New Approach commitments. I am disappointed that, despite the New Decade, New Approach agreement commitment that we would tackle climate change, I have not been able to get my proposals tabled for discussion. Those proposals have gone through due process and public consultation, which this Bill has not.

I also want to highlight one of the reasons why, compared with the rest of the UK, we did not have a climate change Bill before now. It is because the institutions were collapsed for three years by Sinn Féin and important work like this was not taken forward. People should not forget that and the fact that Sinn Féin Members put everything else on the slow burner because of their issues.

I have deep concerns about the Bill that has been brought before us today. Given those serious concerns, I cannot support it, as I believe that it would seriously damage Northern Ireland. I have many concerns about the Bill, but I will outline the main concerns today, which each and every one of us should consider.

My first concern is the extremely important issue of the target that has been set in the Bill. It is so far removed from the independent expert advice and evidence that I cannot support it. Based on the evidence that I have received and shared widely, a target of net zero by 2045 would be extremely detrimental to our economy without actually reducing global greenhouse gas emissions. It would simply shift our emissions elsewhere. Ultimately, that would mean shifting our food production to those areas that are responsible for cutting down rainforests, which are the very lungs of the earth.

Is that really the result that you want for the people of Northern Ireland whom you represent?

### 7.00 pm

I hope that all Members will pay heed and give serious consideration to what I have to say regarding my concerns about a Bill that would be very damaging to Northern Ireland. It is a view that evidence supports. I am not simply asking Members to take my word. I want them to take into account the lack of evidence provided by the sponsor and drafters of the Bill; the existing and publicly available expert and independent evidence and advice from the UK Climate Change Committee; my consideration of responses to a proper consultation that my Department and I carried out on climate change Bill policy proposals for Northern Ireland; and my consideration of the voices of those who have contacted me and many Members in recent weeks and who would be most deeply and negatively impacted on by a target of net zero emissions by 2045, a target for which there is such a lack of evidence.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Minister for giving way. He talks about evidence, consultation and his proposals. Can he confirm that the majority of those who responded to his

consultation suggested that 2045 was the appropriate target for net zero?

**Mr Poots:** What I can confirm is the independent, science-based evidence that has been provided to my Department. If the Member wants me to ignore independent scientific advice, he should stand up and say so. *[Pause.]* OK, he does not want to.

First, the CCC has categorically stated that a net zero target by 2050 for Northern Ireland that covers all greenhouse gases cannot credibly be set at this time, let alone by 2045, as proposed in the private Member's Bill. The CCC has advised, on the basis of its evidence and analysis, that a net greenhouse gas emissions reduction target of at least 82% is an appropriate and fair contribution to a balanced pathway to a UK net zero target that aligns with the UK commitment to the Paris agreement.

We, as one country, the United Kingdom, can achieve 100% net zero. Northern Ireland, because it is a major provider of protein for people's food in the United Kingdom, does not have to meet the same target as the rest of the United Kingdom. We can move forward significantly on transport and energy. However, the high production rate in agri-food in Northern Ireland makes 100% much more challenging. For Northern Ireland to reach a net emissions reduction target of at least 82%, it needs to have a percentage reduction greater than that required in the rest of the UK to reach net zero. For example, Scotland is almost halfway to net zero emissions, having had a 45% reduction at 2018. Northern Ireland, meanwhile, is under a quarter of the way to reaching a reduction of at least 82%, having had only a 20% reduction at 2018.

A target reduction of at least 82% in no way lacks ambition. It is easier to move up towards 100% than to be locked into 100% and unable to move anywhere. The outcome of that would be the devastation of our rural communities. I look at Members across the Chamber who represent Mid Ulster, South Antrim, North Antrim, West Tyrone, East Londonderry, South Down and other areas. Do they really want a devastated rural community where tens of thousands of households lose their source of income, the food that goes on their table and the roof that goes over their head because their jobs have been removed from them? Is that what Mr McGuigan wants?

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Minister for giving way. It is important to put on record that the private Member's Bill has been taken forward in response to the Minister's lack of action. It is important also to put on record that it is not appropriate for the Minister to scaremonger in the Chamber. He is well aware that the AERA Committee will call experts to give evidence, including the CCC in which he puts so much stock. He is also aware that the carbon action plans will have to be agreed by all Assembly Members.

**Mr Poots:** I have to deal with the misleading information that the Member has just given.

He says that there is a lack of action, but my Department has gone through a full public consultation process — this Bill has not — and engaged with the public and gone through processes correctly. When I was asked to produce the Bill in three months, I said that it was impossible. It was impossible for my Department to do that because at least eight or 12 weeks is normally given for public consultation.

What was being asked of me last year was not achievable. I indicated that it was not achievable. There is a saying that rushed legislation is bad legislation. That is what we are dealing with today: rushed legislation, without proper public consultation. It has, therefore, written off the rural community.

I stand here as a defender of the rural community. I stand here as a defender of the hill farmers of the Sperrins and the Antrim plateau, which Sinn Féin does not seem to care about any more. Contrary to what the proposer of the Bill suggested —

**Mr McAleer:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Poots:** I will.

**Mr McAleer:** I want to pick up on a couple of points. The Minister cites the UK CCC comments as the only evidence on the North. There is something that I genuinely cannot get my head around. We are on the same island as the South of Ireland. We are one country. Agriculture accounts for one third of the South of Ireland's emissions; we are on 27%. Why are the experts in the South of Ireland, through Teagasc, not making those dire predictions? Why has the president of the Irish Farmers' Association in the South of Ireland said that it is pure nonsense to suggest that there will be herd cuts to achieve GHG emissions targets?

When I was out of the Chamber, I heard Clare Bailey on the television. She made the point that it is the beginning of a process rather than an event. The Committee will spend the next six months scrupulously analysing the Bill. We will get experts in and hold round-table events. We will hold public consultation exercises. Experts from across the water in Britain and from here in Ireland and, of course, other parts of the world as well will help us to reach a firm conclusion. It is a process, not an event.

**Mr Poots:** Maybe the Member should tell his Sinn Féin colleague Matt Carthy about his views. He said that if:

*"we import from countries of more intensive production such as those in South America, that is not climate action. That is hypocrisy."*

That is what your own colleague says about what you are pressing today. He said:

*"I have listened to Government representatives all throughout this debate talking about just transition and fairness for rural communities, and none of them has specified what that means in reality."*

I have listened to the same today. I agree with your Sinn Féin colleague Mr Carthy, who recognises the damage that you are doing to rural communities, particularly hill farmers. Those in marginalised lands will face the harshest cuts as a consequence of what you are backing and going into the Lobby behind me to support.

Contrary to what the proposer of the Bill suggested to the AERA Committee in a recent briefing, the CCC is clear that there is no credible pathway at this time for net zero by 2050 in Northern Ireland and that it cannot recommend such a target for Northern Ireland. It has advised that reaching net zero in 2050 would require one or both of two conditions, one being:

*"A substantial reduction in output from Northern Ireland's livestock farming sector"*

— where even a reduction of more than 50% in livestock numbers would not get us to net zero —

*"Without a corresponding reduction in consumption of such produce, this would simply shift emissions overseas"*

for no overall benefit. If we are shifting it to South America, it is estimated that it will take twice as much carbon to produce a kilogram of beef than it would if the beef were produced in Northern Ireland.

Why do you want to devastate our rural landscape? Why do you want to devastate our rural fabric? Why do you want to devastate our rural communities and then import beef from an area that is producing it with twice as much carbon going into the atmosphere as would go in if we produced it in Northern Ireland? I will give way to anybody who wishes to answer that.

**Mr McAleer:** Can I ask —?

**Ms Bailey:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Speaker:** Order, please. I remind Members to address their remarks through the Chair.

**Mr McAleer:** The Minister quoted Lord Deben and the UK CCC as the experts. I do not take away from the fact that they are experts. Does he also accept Lord Deben's message that, if we do not sign up to climate legislation, we will be punished by the rest of the world?

Does he not accept that, given that a lot of our agri-food is produced across the island of Ireland, we are sending the wrong message to the rest of the world that the North is not committed to climate change legislation as required by the Paris agreement whereas the South of Ireland is?

**Mr Poots:** That is exactly why we are signing up to legislation. That is why I have been waiting for six weeks — almost seven weeks now — for that legislation to be allowed through the Executive. Your own colleagues are holding it back. Let us get it out here to debate it. Let us have the legislation that was publicly consulted on put in front of you and ensure that we drive this forward.

Not every part of the United Kingdom will achieve 100%. Some areas will have sinks, which will achieve a greater percentage, while other areas will not. We happen to be one of those areas that is engaged in producing high levels of food for the United Kingdom and beyond. We produce around 10% of the United Kingdom's protein. It is something that we have exported very successfully, and we are doing extremely well, with a low carbon footprint for the number of kilograms of beef and litres of milk produced. The Climate Change Committee letter states:

*"a much greater than equitable share of all UK greenhouse gas removal technologies being located in Northern Ireland compared to the size of Northern Ireland's current emissions, population, land area or economy"*

would be both costly and suboptimal. It has identified the costs of reaching net zero by 2050 as being:

*"higher than those of the recommended 82% reduction target ... by up to £900 million per year by 2050"*

Ms Bailey did not give any figures, but there are figures there. I pose these questions: where does the £900

million come from? Does it come from the Department of Health, the Department of Education or the Department for Infrastructure? From which Department are you going to take that additional funding? We are going to have to invest heavily in the first instance, and that is a further £900 million per annum that you are going to walk through the Lobbies for very shortly. Before you do it, I repeat the questions: from where is that money coming? From which Department do you want to take it? From which service do you want to take it? That is important.

Reaching net zero by 2045 would have even greater cost implications, and we have no evidence from this private Member's Bill of what the costs might be, as its co-sponsors have not provided any sort of economic impact assessment. In fact, I have seen no evidence of any impact assessments, such as an economic needs assessment or, indeed, a rural needs assessment, having been carried out on the Bill. Although it may not be fully possible to identify the cost implications of reaching net zero by 2045, there is enough independent expert evidence available about the likely significant impacts of such a target, particularly for the agriculture sector. For example, even based on the "at least 82%" net emissions reduction by 2050, the CCC has indicated that significant investments are required, such as low-carbon capital investment and the need to scale up to £1 billion to £1.5 billion a year by 2030 in Northern Ireland. Your proposal is to put another £900 million a year on top of that. Those are the sorts of figures that we are talking about: close to £2.5 billion per annum that has to be found out of the Northern Ireland block.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Poots:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** The Minister has vast experience in this Building, and he knows that we are only at the initial stage with this.

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member use the microphone, please?

**Mr Wells:** Most people can hear me, Mr Speaker, but most people do not want to hear me.

**Mr Speaker:** It will not be reported by Hansard unless you speak into the microphone.

**Mr Wells:** The Minister has vast experience in this Building. We are only at the initial stage of the process. He knows from experience that the Bill is going to go through Committee, where Mr McAleer and his team will dissect it line by line. It will come back here, probably in a very different form, after that process, and there will be a whole series of amendments made to it. Today is only about accepting the concept and principle of the Climate Change Bill and accepting that we have to have one. Indeed, would the Minister be suggesting his climate change Bill at all, if the private Member's Bill had not arrived on the scene?

**7.15 pm**

**Mr Poots:** Absolutely, because the work was being done on it. We were doing the work to go out to public consultation before the private Member's Bill was brought forward. The wise thing to do is ensure that a Bill goes through the Executive and out to the Northern Ireland public so that it has been done properly, in that it has gone through the public consultation process that has been so neatly ignored by the sponsors of this Bill.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for giving way. He talks much about public consultation. Can he confirm that he does not support any private Member's Bill being introduced in the House without that type of consultation prior to its introduction?

**Mr Poots:** The Member has asked a question. I have raised the issue of public consultation. The Bill will affect every person in Northern Ireland, given the costs associated with it and its impact. It will particularly affect the rural community. Therefore, I find the appropriateness of bringing forward legislation without any consultation with that community challenging. Maybe the Member thinks that the rural community does not matter; I happen to think that it does and will defend it, irrespective of the Member's views.

I go back to my earlier point. On the basis of the CCC's — I am not getting on very well with this speech, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** I will take the opportunity to remind you that you have confirmed that you would finish your remarks at 7.30 pm.

**Mr Poots:** OK, right. I need to get on with it and stop taking interventions.

To go back to an earlier point, on the basis of the CCC's evidence, the aim of net zero in Northern Ireland by 2050 would mean every sector doing more than it has projected in its balanced pathway projections to UK net zero. On top of that, even a further reduction of 50% to Northern Ireland's livestock would not get us to net zero. To put it simply, to get to net zero by 2045, as proposed by the Bill, the livestock sector would have to shrink dramatically to, basically, a non-existent level, which is unacceptable. Northern Ireland plays an important food production role for the UK, with nearly 50% of Northern Ireland's agri-food produce being consumed in the rest of the UK. The target in the Bill disregards and threatens that important role. As the CCC has said, going beyond its recommendation of a target of at least 82% to a target of net zero by 2045 will, most simply, move agri-food production elsewhere for no overall global benefit. That has to be accepted tonight: no overall global benefit.

When briefing the Agriculture Committee, the Bill's sponsor indicated, with regard to dairy, that any reduction in what is produced in Northern Ireland for the purposes of reducing emissions could be offset by increasing production in western Europe or New Zealand — simply exporting the problem. I struggle to see how that could have a positive impact on either the dairy sector or global emissions, given the high-quality food production standards that we have in Northern Ireland. It should be noted that 65% of our farmland is best suited to growing grass for animals. We are well placed to deliver sustainable food. I ask this again: why would we export production when greenhouse gas emissions from UK beef are about half the global average?

I reiterate that the CCC has made it clear that one of the main risks of Northern Ireland pushing towards a more ambitious target than it has recommended through making a substantial reduction in output from the livestock sector is that, without a corresponding reduction in the consumption of such produce, we would simply shift emissions overseas and not reduce emissions globally. Climate change is a global challenge, not just a local one. We all need to recognise that.

My role is to protect and enhance the environment in a sustainable way and to ensure that the agriculture sector thrives as the custodian of the environment. That should be the aim of every Member. We should, therefore, not promote actions and pass legislation that would prevent us fulfilling that responsibility. The CCC has also stated that, at present, a net zero target for Northern Ireland set for 2050 or earlier, rather than contributing to extra overall reductions in UK greenhouse gas emissions, could simply shift a greater share of the UK-wide costs of reaching net zero to Northern Ireland. I ask all of you this: who will pay the extra costs that Northern Ireland will have to bear? Are there not better activities that we could spend that money on while the UK still reaches the net zero target? The potential additional costs and impacts of achieving a net zero emissions reduction target by 2045 in Northern Ireland, as opposed to the target of at least 82% by 2050 that the CCC has recommended, could, therefore, be extensively more significant. The economic impact on sectors would also be much more substantial than in the rest of the UK.

Some may be of the opinion that, because of the agriculture sector in Northern Ireland, we cannot achieve net zero. However, I want to dispel the rhetoric that the target given by the Climate Change Committee of at least 82% is there just to protect agriculture. The CCC's advice is that, even if agricultural methane emissions were removed from the supplementary target, the Northern Ireland 2050 target would still be only a 93% reduction in emissions. There are other reasons, one of which is the number of people who live in rural communities and rely on either oil or coal heating. That is something that seems, again, to be ignored by Members from across the House who allegedly represent rural communities.

The memorandum accompanying the private Member's Bill includes a reference to just transition principles and objectives that sectoral plans in the Bill should deliver. That was also highlighted at the Committee briefing by the Bill sponsor as something that would provide protection and support for sectors. From the independent evidence and advice that I have received from the CCC, it is not clear how such a net zero by 2045 target would or, indeed, could deliver a just transition in Northern Ireland for sectors including the agricultural sector and the rural community.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Poots:** Yes.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Minister advise what the budget that has been spoken about for the just transition is?

**Mr Poots:** No budget has come from the sponsors of the Bill, but the advice that we have received is that it would cost up to £2.5 billion per annum.

As I have stated, the CCC has made it clear that a 2045 net zero target would not represent a balanced pathway for Northern Ireland to reduce emissions. In addition to significant reductions in our agricultural output, there could be perverse outcomes if Northern Ireland were to attempt to go too fast in reducing emissions. For example, going beyond the natural rate of stock turnover would lead to a premature scrapping of assets. That could be costly and would risk undermining popular support for transition, and the CCC has said that it could cause increased embedded emissions and unfair distributional impacts, particularly if

Northern Ireland targets were out of line with HM Treasury actions to support a just transition to the UK target.

When briefing the AERA Committee, the sponsor of the Bill indicated that the Bill would compensate farmers and agri-industry. I see nothing in the Bill that would specifically and effectively deliver on that. Yet another bland and blank promise with no evidence to support it. In recent evidence to the AERA Committee, the Bill's sponsor indicated that the Bill does not set specific targets for sectors or dates and deadlines. She said that it is a framework Bill and:

*"there is nothing in the Bill that will harm the agriculture sector."*

Motherhood and apple pie.

While the Bill contains elements that set out a framework for developing plans and the scrutiny of them, the inclusion of the net zero target effectively means that all sectors, including the agriculture sector, will have to aim for close to net zero emissions by 2045. That will obviously have a significant impact on all sectors, and, as I have stated before, the agriculture sector in particular. This is clearly not just a framework Bill, but some are trying to say it does not really mean what all the agriculture bodies say it means. Let us call it for what it is.

The suggestion that the Bill will not harm the agriculture sector is plainly wrong. It is not backed by evidence and advice from the CCC and is not a view shared by the companies and people who work in the agriculture sector, many of whom have been writing to me and, indeed, other Members to express concerns about the impact of the Bill. The Bill sponsor, in evidence to the Committee, indicated that she hoped that, when the first climate action plan under the Bill was being implemented in several years' time:

*"we can start to create baselines and get the real information on the full extent of what we need to be grappling with in Northern Ireland."*

That further highlights that the target in the Bill is based on blind ambition rather than any actual evidence.

I share the desire to strive for environmental excellence and sustainability and to tackle the issue of climate change head on, but targets should be ambitious and realistic and based on the most relevant high-quality and independent advice that takes account of the specific factors relevant to Northern Ireland. There is also a restriction in the Bill that prevents the headline 2045 zero emissions target being amended to a date beyond 2045. That does not allow for flexibility to take on board the emerging issues that Mr McAleer referred to or a changing understanding of the evidence and the science, and it is not consistent with climate change legislation elsewhere.

The proposals in the private Member's Bill contrast with the proposals that I have made to my Executive colleagues, which they are considering. They would result in legislation that sets ambitious and evidence-based targets, is forward-thinking and provides flexibility and scope to amend those targets as a result of emerging evidence and understanding, new advice, new technology and other advancements. Eighty-two per cent is a minimum; it is not a target. It is achievable, unlike what is being put to us at the minute.

Despite previous claims by the sponsors of the Bill regarding consultation, there has not been credible evidence presented of a proper consultation having been undertaken on the Bill. While that is permissible, it is a serious oversight. On the basis of what has been provided and communicated, it appears that views were limited only to members and supporters of the organisations responsible for developing and bringing the Bill forward. That is not a substitute for proper consultation and giving everyone, including those who will be heavily impacted, the right to comment on proposals before legislation is tabled, debated and rushed through. It is highly unacceptable. Climate change affects everyone, and everyone in Northern Ireland should have their say on what climate change legislation should look like.

It is clear to me that, despite what the Bill sponsor indicated to the AERA Committee, there is little or no support for the Bill in the agriculture sector. The agri-food sector is fully behind the need to address global warming and reduce emissions and is already making serious advances. However, it cannot support a Bill for net zero by 2045 because it is not evidence-based. It has not been properly consulted on or assessed for its impact. It does not recognise the importance of our agri-food sector or the people who work in it as a net producer of high-quality food. Many companies and people who work in the agriculture sector have written to me and other MLAs expressing their concerns about the impact of the Bill. They have also written to my Executive colleagues urging them to support the Bill that I have proposed, which awaits approval.

The sponsors and drafters of the Bill have indicated that they have plans to advance their consultation activities as the Bill progresses and hope that the consultation process for the Bill can take place during Committee Stage. That is not an acceptable or appropriate way to legislate. The approach of early and inclusive consultation is more likely to lead to better outcomes and greater acceptance in the community — Mr Wells asked me about that — particularly amongst stakeholders who may be adversely affected by the policy.

The handling of the Bill before us today has not afforded everyone a fair opportunity to have their say in a timely manner, and, as I said, rushed legislation is generally poor legislation. I would go so far as to say confidently that, on the basis of the information and evidence that I have received, the Bill before us today does not consider real-world impacts. I question whether the sponsor Member and the co-sponsors of the Bill even know or understand the real-world impacts of the Bill that they have brought before us today. That is on the basis of their complete disregard of the UK CCC's expert independent advice on an effective, appropriate and achievable emissions reduction target for Northern Ireland. Also, I base the assertion on their lack of proper consultation and their failure to produce or attempt to produce any sort of impact assessments, whether regulatory, economic, rural or human rights.

Put simply and in summary, the 2045 net zero target before us today is not based on any evidence, analysis or feasibility. It goes against the principles of making good, sound legislation. We have independent scientific advice that delivers ambitious targets, yet we disregard the evidence. Given the lack of detail and evidence in the Bill,

I feel that it is very much style over substance, but, to be fair, the Bill has neither. I am supportive of climate change action. I have a Bill that is awaiting Executive approval. This private Member's Bill will have negative impacts on all Northern Ireland businesses, but, as I have highlighted, agriculture is disproportionately impacted. In contrast, my Department consulted on policy options for climate change legislation for Northern Ireland and has been using this and the expert advice provided to strike the right balance between ambition and realism.

I want to raise another concern about the Bill, which is the duties and functions placed on Departments and other bodies in the Bill. For example, the role envisaged in the Bill for the Executive Office does not appear to fall within its current functions. It is also not clear whether there are adequate resources in the Department to undertake the range of functions envisaged or whether any consultation has taken place with the Executive Office on the potential role that it will have. I ask the Member whether she or her co-sponsors have engaged TEO on that. Have they asked whether those duties can be fulfilled under the current structures? Are there adequate resources and expertise? Does the Bill not place any duties on my Department or any other Northern Ireland Department to provide input to the Executive Office to enable it to fulfil its duties? What engagement has the Bill sponsor had with CCC in respect of the new functions that the Bill places on it? Can it be resourced to carry those out?

The CCC's advice is considered to be an essential element by the Bill's sponsors, yet they completely ignore the advice from the CCC —

**7.30 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Minister to wind up his remarks.

**Mr Poots:** Thank you.

— on its key aspect, which is the long-term greenhouse gas emissions target. Is the spirit of the Bill just to cherry-pick the advice and evidence that suits and to disregard any sound or impartial evidence?

I could say more, Mr Speaker, but I respect your call. I oppose the Bill as it is currently proposed.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Clare Bailey to conclude and wind up the debate. You have until 8.00 pm at the latest.

**Ms Bailey:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Members for their engagement on the Climate Change Bill. Many interesting issues were raised. I hope that, as the Bill moves through its legislative stages in the Assembly, that engagement will continue to be constructive so that we can strengthen and enhance the Bill, as many said. I am also more than willing to continue to work across the House in order to get the Bill passed. The pantomime of plenary politics is of much less interest to me than getting the actual work done.

Some common themes arose in the debate. I am pleased that there is general consensus on the need for sustainable decarbonisation for Northern Ireland and for continued democratic oversight and robust independent auditing of that process. The Bill provides that. While some of the discussion naturally veered into areas of policy, I restate that the Bill is a framework that will mandate action across all sectors and Departments. It is not prescriptive and does not dictate policy. All future policy will be for

Ministers and the Executive to bring forward in climate action plans. That would be the perfect place for an economic stability policy for our hill farmers, for example, to be produced. That was one example that was raised by the Minister.

The target of net zero by 2045 reflects the general legislative trend towards stronger climate legislation, with the proven context that we are living in an interconnected climate and ecological emergency. Urgent action is needed in order to limit global temperature increases and prevent runaway climate change. At the UK and international levels, we need strong targets to allow us to keep pace with constantly moving goalposts. Northern Ireland cannot afford to be a laggard in the UK. If and when the UK decides to accelerate its targets and ambition, just as we saw last month when Prime Minister Boris Johnson increased the UK's emissions reduction target to 78% by 2035 — that is almost in line with the UUP manifesto — we will be on the wrong path to adapt to that.

I have heard many quotes from the CCC's letter to Minister Poots on the setting of net zero targets. The letter also states:

*"As new evidence on climate science, behaviours or low-carbon technologies (particularly in low-carbon farming measures) emerges and/or the UK's international climate commitments change, it may be prudent to tighten a 2050 target in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's climate legislation should allow emissions reductions to go beyond our current assessment by requiring at least an 82% reduction, and should contain clear provisions to tighten the target if there is evidence to support such a decision."*

I am still quoting the CCC; these are not my words. It continues:

*"We have already seen similar provisions used to increase climate targets for the UK, Scotland and Wales since 2019."*

In recent communications with the Minister on the economic implications of setting and delivering a 2050 emissions target for Northern Ireland, the CCC was abundantly clear when it stated:

*"Business models that are not compatible with a Net Zero future are increasingly risky."*

The CCC's report also acknowledges the 50% reduction in herd size, which is not in our Bill, and recommends that it is based on available evidence. However, there are ways to reduce emissions without reducing herd sizes, and that is what we want to explore.

Watching the rest of the UK and our neighbours in the Republic forge ahead with net zero climate targets, hoping that we can just opt out and keep our heads down, is not a viable strategy for Northern Ireland, and it will cause us problems in future. The EU, the Republic of Ireland and even the US will set net zero targets. Most developed countries in the world have set a net zero target. A recent court ruling in Germany saw it increase its ambition from 2050 to 2045. Wales has set a net zero target that goes beyond the CCC's recommendation of 95% by 2050. Is Northern Ireland really the only place that cannot do it?

If we are to set ourselves a limit and a lower bar, who are we requiring to do even more than their fair share in order

for the UK to be net zero? Are we asking England to pick up our missing slack? Are we asking Scotland or Wales? What have they said in response? Can they do it? If the Republic works to a net zero target and we do not, what will the transboundary impacts be? Will there be legal implications?

The Climate Change Committee is a respected committee of experts, and we look forward to working closely with it on the Bill. When it gave the Minister the 82% target, it was based on current economic models, not as a stopping point but as an absolute target that we can no longer argue that we cannot achieve. It continues to encourage us to go that little bit further and be that little bit more ambitious.

There are questions about the CCC's proposed modelling for agriculture and concerns that it has not explored many pathways for low-carbon farming. Its sixth carbon budget acknowledges that the greenhouse gas impacts of less-intensive farming, or agroecology methods, are not included in its scenarios. Its states that that is:

*"due to the lack of robust evidence".*

That was mentioned by Philip McGuigan earlier in the debate. How would any credible expert predict pathways without robust evidence? There is evidence, though, to show that less-intensive farming has the potential to be extremely beneficial to the achievement of our target without the large-scale output cuts modelled by the CCC.

I look forward to Committee Stage as an opportunity to explore those issues in more detail. The Committee has already heard from nature-friendly farmers on the matter, and they have identified the lack of finance currently available to them for their wider sustainability measures. There are other issues to explore further.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will she note that Unite and others who represent farmers and food producers have raised concerns that the scrapping of the Agricultural Wages Board would place people who are already in precarious situations in further danger of low pay? The Minister has proposed to do that while claiming fake and faux concern about people in that sector. Does the Member agree with that?

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member for the intervention. Indeed, I have met the union on that issue and will continue to engage with it. Yes, it does cause alarm.

Mr Wells, for one, was very eloquent in outlining that the lobbying that, no doubt, we have all had over the past few days has been in UFU emails. Of course we are listening and will continue to listen to it. I reiterate that there is nothing in the Bill that will harm agriculture. Agriculture is listed, along with all other sectors, as an area that needs to see reductions in emissions. It is not the Bill saying that. Rather, it is the world in which we live. Nothing in the Bill mandates any immediate changes to the sector. The way in which the climate action plans are designed, with a carbon budget over five years but with no specific reduction targets given to individual sectors, means that those sectors that are ready to move immediately can do the heavy lifting over the first few years, with a more gradual transition for other sectors. Members should note that support for the Bill has been received from many sectors. Indeed, we have also been criticised by some for not being ambitious enough.

As we begin to roll out climate action plans and learn how to measure and collect robust evidence, and as that is overseen by independent outside commissioners and offices and is reported on to the Assembly for debate and scrutiny, I cannot see how we will be in the same place in five years' time, never mind 25 years' time, when we get to 2045. The Bill ensures that fairness will be built into any measures that are introduced. Sectoral plans will have to create high-value, fair work and reduce poverty and inequality, so job creation strategies will also be an essential component of any climate action plans.

We do, however, need to look at the social and environmental sustainability of farming in Northern Ireland. Not all farmers are opposed to the Bill. It is surprising that any MLA would cite climate action as the biggest threat to farmers when, in fact, departmental policies that are in place right now have seen farm numbers fall year-on-year, bargaining power given over to supermarkets and the position of farmers in the value chain constantly eroded. I have to wonder whether the concerns are about farming families or agri-corporations. We need a new deal for Northern Ireland farmers that encourages young people to take up farming and ensures a profitable and sustainable industry for them in the decades ahead in which they are paid for sustainable and climate-friendly practice. It is not our position that we want to see fewer farmers. We would like to see all sizes of farms — small, medium and large — survive and thrive. It is not the Bill that is a threat to farmers. Business as usual under current departmental policy is the real threat. It is therefore time for a green new deal and to build back better for everyone.

When we look at the costs associated with the Bill, we see that the immediate costs are for setting up the Northern Ireland climate office, including the climate commissioner and staff, and will be mainly for salaries and pensions.

The climate commissioner's powers and remit are modelled on those of the Public Services Ombudsman, including clause 6(8) that Mr Allister was speaking to. In my opinion, the ombudsman and that office are working pretty well. I have a meeting with them pretty soon, and I am looking forward to that.

**7.45 pm**

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Bailey:** Certainly.

**Mr Wells:** Many Members were taken by the evidence given by Mr Allister on the pay and status of the commissioner and on the lack of accountability, given that the commissioner is to be appointed by the Assembly Commission rather than by any particular Department. Is the Member prepared to meet those concerns halfway during Committee Stage or is she wedded to the structure that she has articulated?

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I am wedding —. Sorry. I will never be wedding. I am wedded to full independence for the commissioner and for the office, and I am happy to continue talking and looking at other models. We looked at the provisions and at how the Public Services Ombudsman in particular was established, and we have modelled what is contained in this Bill on that. I am more than happy, however, to keep talking to the Member about it if he has anything more that we want to bring to me.

We have also sought the Finance Minister's recommendation for setting up the commissioner's office, and we are engaging with him on that issue. It is important that the funding for it come out of the Consolidated Fund, as the climate commissioner role is intended to be a permanent position. We thank the Minister for his engagement thus far.

More broadly, the climate action plans will have financial implications, but they go beyond the immediate remit of the Bill. Achieving net zero will involve significant investment, and it is foolish to consider that even an 82% reduction, as is preferred by the Minister, would not also require significant investment and significant change. There are huge economic opportunities involved in unlocking green investment and green jobs. For example, the National Grid has said the UK will need to recruit over 400,000 people to jobs to build the net zero energy workforce, and almost 14,000 of those jobs will be here in Northern Ireland. I refer again to the CCC's letter to the Minister, in which it stresses in its response:

*"The greatest risks are associated with failing to act quickly enough. Delays to action are likely to increase global climate risk, increase uncertainty for businesses and households, lead to unnecessary costs in future, and could lead to Northern Ireland missing out on the benefits of climate investment that takes place elsewhere in the UK."*

We must also consider the cost of inaction. Damages avoided, such as through climate action, must be compared with the cost of meeting targets. The cost of action has been estimated at 1% to 2% of GDP. Inaction, on the other hand, could lead to a reduction in global GDP of 10% by 2050 and of 25% by the end of the century.

I will now deal with the issue of consultation, which some Members raised. I hope that Members are aware of the legislative process for private Members' Bills, where there is no requirement to consult at this stage. I also remind Members, perhaps those opposing this Bill, that, had the Minister introduced legislation, as he was supposed to, it would not have been necessary to introduce climate change legislation as a private Member's Bill. This Bill has adhered to exactly the same process as all other private Members' Bills that have been brought through the House and all other private Members' Bills that are currently awaiting introduction.

To reinforce my point on the issue of consultation, the majority of respondents to the recent DAERA consultation were in favour of a net zero target by 2045, as Philip McGuigan said. Those numbers were discounted in the Department's response. Maybe that would be an advisable approach that we should all employ. Maybe all the co-sponsors of the Bill should employ that approach, with the email campaigns and lobbying that we are getting. However, I cannot imagine that any one of us would agree that that would be a fair way forward.

I look forward to the Committee Stage as an opportunity to gather further evidence and to engage with a wide range of stakeholders so that the Bill can be strengthened as it advances. We are determined that this will be a collaborative process, and we have met groups from many sectors, including energy, transport, infrastructure, agriculture, rural communities. Most, though not all, have been broadly supportive. We will continue to engage.

By way of reassurance, I point out that every climate action plan will have a rural needs impact assessment carried out, as provided for under the Rural Needs Act 2016. What rural communities tell me they need now is clean air, for example, instead of the ammonia-laden air that they have been breathing for years. They want clean waterways and an end to constant, repeated pollution. They want jobs, transport and sustainable futures.

Let me quote from an email that I received today from an organisation in a rural area:

*"Climate change represents the most complex challenge of our time."*

They want their:

*"children and grandchildren to have the opportunity to live their lives in vibrant, sustainable, rural communities."*

They say:

*"The responsibility is on us all now to take action."*

The last line of their email reads:

*"There is nothing to fear from being ambitious and proactively building a better future."*

I am pleased that there is a majority consensus in the Chamber for the principles of the Bill and also for the need for urgent climate action.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that global warming is likely to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052. If we continue to emit greenhouse gases at the current rate, we will reach the point of catastrophic change by 2070. The multi-organisation report, 'United in Science', stresses that current emission trends are not compatible with limiting temperature increases to 1.5°C, and certainly not to anything well below 2°C.

The last decade of political failure and inaction on climate change has cost us dear, shrinking the window for action by two thirds. Those 10 years are key. Wherever you stand on targets or approaches, one thing is undeniable: we must start now.

Mr Speaker, I want to thank the co-sponsors of the Bill. I am aware that co-sponsors are not recognised in Assembly processes, but the fact that they are here and signed up shows that efforts have been made to do things differently with the Bill. I thank Philip McGuigan, Mark Durkan, Steve Aiken, John Blair, Gerry Carroll, Claire Sugden and Trevor Lunn. I thank you all for stepping up, for being brave, and for your support.

I know that Jim Wells engaged with the Climate Coalition also. Thank you for that, Mr Wells.

I hope that we can vote through the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill for Northern Ireland, 2021.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I put the Question, I remind Members that, in the event of a Division, they should be mindful of their social-distancing obligations while voting.

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 58; Noes 29.*

## AYES

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, 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 Wells, Miss Woods.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Carroll and Miss Woods.*

## NOES

*Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P 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 Storey, Mr Weir.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Givan and Mr Harvey.*

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

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

*Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan [Teller, Noes], Mr Harvey [Teller, Noes], Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.*

*Mr Butler voted for Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.*

*Ms Ennis voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan 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 Mr Lunn.*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill [NIA 19/17-22] be agreed.*

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

*Adjourned at 8.18 pm.*



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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 11 May 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Ministerial Statement

### Redevelopment of CAFRE's Greenmount and Loughry Campuses and the Development of New Beef Facilities at AFBI and CAFRE

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in light of social distancing being observed by the parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members who are participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members who are present in the Chamber must also do that and may do so by rising in their place, as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. I also remind Members that points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period afterwards.

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you say, Mr Speaker, we are about to hear a statement from the Agriculture Minister. Of course, we were able to read that statement, effectively, in Saturday's 'Farming Life', and, today, we have had the Economy Minister in the media announcing what she is calling an economic vision for a decade of innovation. Why is it that the way that we now seem to do government is that the Assembly is an afterthought, or not thought of at all, when it comes to ministerial proclamations?

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for his point of order. The Member will be aware that I have raised repeatedly with the Executive, through the past year or so, the point that it is very important — indeed, essential — to respect the role of the Assembly. For the most, that has been adhered to, but the Member's point is on the record. Perhaps the question could be put to the Minister directly, and to the other Minister referred to at a later point. I will, of course, refer the remarks that the Member has made this morning to the Executive Office.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to make a short statement to the House about two major investments by my Department. It was an oversight on my part that the first one went out publicly before I got it to the Assembly. I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, for that.

We look to underpin the future sustainable growth of the Northern Ireland agri-food industry through this investment. The first is a £75 million investment in the educational facilities at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) that will revolutionise the campuses at Loughry and Greenmount, where around 1,500 students are being educated to take the agri-food industry into the next generation. Those facilities were built over 50 years ago and are now at the end of life. It is, therefore, fitting that my Department is making this investment in the centenary year of Northern Ireland. CAFRE has a well renowned reputation in the agri-food industry for providing excellent tuition and training facilities for the next generation of farmers, growers and agri-food personnel.

Our agri-food sector has faced many challenges over the past century and has grown to develop a global reputation for high-quality food and traceability. It is now time to invest in each campus in order to provide modern and well-designed facilities that will meet the needs of students, staff and industry during the next century. The investment complements the recent launch of the Bachelor of Science with honours degrees in sustainable agriculture and horticulture and the higher level apprenticeships in food and will ensure that CAFRE remains at the forefront of agri-food education across these islands. The plans for Loughry will also include a science centre, which will be shared with food research staff in the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI). Those top-class facilities will be the centre of knowledge and innovation for the industry leaders and decision-makers of the future.

I am pleased to announce an investment of £10 million to commence the development of new beef research facilities at AFBI, Hillsborough, and CAFRE. Those new facilities will integrate the future development of research, technology transfer and education at AFBI and CAFRE, which will assist in the delivery of my green growth initiative. In order to ensure that the Northern Ireland beef industry has a vibrant future as a trading sector, we must keep pace and compete on the world stage. The current beef facilities at AFBI and CAFRE are no longer fit for purpose. Investment in new beef facilities will ensure that AFBI and CAFRE have the capacity to carry out leading-edge research and demonstrate technologies in order to support the delivery of education programmes and underpin beef farms across Northern Ireland for the next 30 years. Those new facilities will be critical to ensuring the positive contribution of beef production to the management of the rural environment and to supporting the rural economy. The project will provide multiple long-

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term benefits for the Northern Ireland beef industry, agri-food industry and wider economy.

I also welcome the fact that the design and construction of the new buildings will be environmentally sustainable and will enhance the well-being of all who use, live and work in them. The combined investment of £85 million in the CAFRE campuses and AFBI research facilities will ensure that both those organisations deliver for the future of Northern Ireland's agri-food industry.

**Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I very much welcome the Minister's announcement of this overdue and well-deserved investment. Minister, has any consideration been given to working in partnership with other such research centres across the island of Ireland? Have you any assessment of how this investment could benefit our inclusion in the protected geographical indication (PGI) status for Irish grass-fed beef?

**Mr Poots:** There are two issues there. PGI status for Irish grass-fed beef should have been applied for jointly. Unfortunately, the Republic of Ireland Government decided to charge ahead without Northern Ireland, in spite of the fact that we were ready to go. They used a fairly puerile excuse for not doing it together. It reflects very badly on the Republic of Ireland Government that they did not work together with us on that. I am also looking to develop a British PGI status so that we can genuinely achieve the best of both worlds.

With regard to working with the Science Institute in Ireland, we have suggested that, when it comes to the sequestration of carbon, which is very important given yesterday's debate, work is done jointly because the same issues will apply. Therefore, we will get value for money by doing that. That is something that AFBI is working on with Teagasc.

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the sizeable investment of £85 million in AFBI and CAFRE, which will certainly give confidence in the future of the agri-food industry.

The Minister outlined an important £10 million investment in beef facilities at AFBI, Hillsborough, and CAFRE. Will he outline why that investment is important for the beef sector in Northern Ireland in particular?

**Mr Poots:** The beef research facilities at AFBI are at end of life, so their ability to carry out accredited research on beef was being lost. New facilities are therefore critical to them.

Considering the debate that we had yesterday on climate change, the work on how we can improve our beef output and reduce the amount of carbon produced from it is critical to the beef industry as we go forward. We have one of the best beef industries anywhere in the world. That is why it appals me when, without thinking of the consequences, people glibly walk through the Lobbies to destroy the beef industry, as happened yesterday. The fact is that, in traceability, provenance, quality and environmental impact, we are ahead of most parts of the world, and we can do even better. The quality of the beef industry in Northern Ireland can go from gold-plated to platinum-plated. That is why we need to invest in our beef industry and ensure that we provide support to allow it to develop and continue to be one of the big income

generators and employers in Northern Ireland, in spite of the worst efforts of others.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Minister for this very welcome investment, some of which is in a well-known and highly reputable facility in the constituency of Mid Ulster. Is there a particular time frame for the sequence of events that will follow: the design, tendering and projected completion dates of the various projects?

**Mr Poots:** The design and planning process and so forth will start straight away. Normally, it takes around two years to deal with those issues for this sort of thing, and then it moves forward to the actual development, which is likely to take under two years. Over the next three to four years, we will see things happen, with substantial change at both campuses and at AFBI.

**Mrs Barton:** Minister, I, too, welcome the investment in the Greenmount and Loughry campuses for the future of our young people who wish to work towards a career in the agri-food industry. Thank you for that. Has consideration been given to increasing the university status of Greenmount by offering an increased number of agricultural or agriculture-based courses there?

I hope that you do not mind my asking a little extra question: has consideration been given to a university course in equine studies, perhaps in the west, such as at the Enniskillen campus?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for her questions. We have recently developed a Bachelor of Science honours course, which is delivered through CAFRE, and we are working with the universities to develop other opportunities. There are tremendous opportunities for Northern Ireland to be a place where people come to be trained and educated in the agricultural environment and agri-food. Our colleges will lead and work with the universities to develop those. The Member knows that I am very keen to establish a veterinary school in Northern Ireland. The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) has recently been engaging with universities on that, so background work is being carried out to develop that.

The equine studies provided at the Enniskillen campus are top-notch. The campus is utilised by people from all over the world, and students from the Enniskillen campus travel all over the world to develop equine skills.

What is being provided at Enniskillen is excellent, but, of course, it can be improved on. If proposals are brought to me that will improve that further, I will be very happy to support them.

**10.45 am**

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for the statement, and I, too, welcome the detail in it. We are living in a time of increased environmental awareness, and all of us want to build back better post COVID. I note that the Minister, understandably, referenced his green growth strategy. My party's recently published document, 'A Green New Deal', seeks to commit to assist farmers in diversification programmes such as agritourism. Minister, does the planned investment seek to enhance diversification opportunities and learning?

**Mr Poots:** The focus of this is on education and training in the area of agri-food, so the focus is not on diversification. I recognise the importance of diversification. That will be

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carried out in other ways. I recognise the importance of rural tourism and of getting that up and running again. I hope that the Executive will make the right decisions over the next number of days and enable people to travel from Great Britain to Northern Ireland to enjoy the tourism offer here in rural communities and, indeed, in other places. Let us get our economy growing again.

**Mr M Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, I welcome the combined £85 million investment in CAFRE at Greenmount and Loughry and in AFBI, and I also welcome the discussions with the SIB about a veterinary college for Northern Ireland. I am very interested in that. Minister, will both investments that have been outlined today have an environmental improvement and sustainability element to their design?

**Mr Poots:** Absolutely. Given that the current buildings were developed, I think, in the 1950s or 1960s, they are not fit for purpose in terms of environment nowadays and would have to be retrofitted, which would be hugely expensive. It is much better to build from scratch to improve what is on offer. I recognise that that needs to be done. I also recognise that the new beef facilities will be developed to reduce the carbon footprint in those facilities, but they will also be a demonstration of what is achievable in farming in reducing the carbon footprint in the keeping of beef cattle. All those things are critical, because CAFRE and AFBI have to be at the leading edge and be capable of demonstrating to the farming community what is possible.

The Member has been a very strong advocate for the veterinary school and, in particular, the Coleraine campus, but we have to be at the leading edge of that science as well. It is critical that Northern Ireland can produce its own vets and have the research facilities to go with that. In my opinion, that should have happened years ago, and I am hugely supportive of that happening now. I want to move that ahead over the next year.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome both investments and the announcement on new beef facilities at AFBI. It cannot be overstated just how important the new research and knowledge transfer facilities are to our industry. Minister, what other strategies has the Department put in place to develop young people's agricultural skills and knowledge?

**Mr Poots:** We have a close working relationship with young people. Last week, I provided support to the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, which do a tremendous job. That is not just people from farming backgrounds but people who have an interest in rural affairs. Many of the people who engage in the Young Farmers' Clubs, for example, are young people from an urban background who absolutely love the rural lifestyle and love to get out and engage with young people from a rural background. We are constantly investing, updating and looking at how we can support young people in the area of agri-food.

Work is being done, for example, in Loughry on agri-food. Anybody who goes to Loughry has a job before they leave. It provides young people with a tremendous opportunity. The science and innovation available there — how we reduce levels of non-recyclables in packaging, and the work that is done with large companies in Northern Ireland to enable them to be at the cutting edge of everything that they do — is absolutely tremendous. We can be proud of

it. We have a joined-up ecosystem for agri-food, and this is an investment in that ecosystem.

**Mr Harvey:** I welcome the announcement, especially given that it is some 50 years since this level of investment was last made. Does the Minister agree that many farms suffer from an underinvestment in buildings, which then impacts on their efficiency?

**Mr Poots:** I do. Moreover, from an environmental viewpoint, we need to invest in agriculture, and we need to invest big. If the people who voted in the Aye Lobby yesterday support me in trying to meet the challenges that face agriculture environmentally, I am sure that they will support my forthcoming bid to the Department of Finance for funding to assist us to achieve higher environmental standards and to ensure that there are cleaner waterways and fewer emissions in the air. I am sure that the most important and significant industry in Northern Ireland — the one with the highest number of employees and a £5 billion turnover — is something that we will support. The Northern Ireland Government will put their money where their mouth is, because there is no point in walking through the Aye Lobby to vote for something that you want if you are not prepared to support it financially. I am sure that I will get massive support from the Minister of Finance to deliver for the agriculture community.

**Mr McHugh:** I thank the Minister for his statement. The skills challenge in rural areas is significant in every respect. Providing financial support to education and having modern facilities are pivotal, not only to the sustainability of the industry but to rural economies. You have answered one of my questions, which was to do with when construction will start. To what extent will the new facilities increase capacity for those who are engaged in the industry?

**Mr Poots:** A lot of work is being done online currently. We will therefore have the opportunity to look at the colleges' capacity. There is good demand for the courses. As I indicated, particularly on the agri-food side, people on those courses have a job before they leave. We want to encourage that kind of progress, development and skills base so that the agri-food sector does not go backwards. In spite of the debate yesterday, I am determined that we will not go backwards, and I am determined that the agri-food sector will continue to grow, provide employment and put food on people's tables and roofs over their heads. In this centenary year, this is an investment in the future of Northern Ireland. Most importantly, it is an investment in the young people who will be in Northern Ireland for the next century.

**Ms Sheerin:** I echo the thanks to the Minister for the announcement of the investment in the CAFRE campuses at Loughry and Greenmount. As a Mid Ulster MLA, I am aware of Loughry's unique course provision and how important that is to anybody who wants to pursue a career in agriculture or any of the other particular threads.

Does the Minister agree that the investment has the potential to provide an economic boost to the big town of Cookstown, which the Loughry campus is just beside?

**Mr Poots:** It does, yes. The major part of the investment is in the science centre and other facilities at the Loughry campus. It is critical that we are at the cutting edge of science, and Loughry is. We have very skilful people there. They need the facilities to go with those skills, and

that is what this is about. It is about ensuring that we have the appropriate facilities along with the appropriate people. Dungannon, where there is a huge food sector, Cookstown, Portadown and other places in the mid-Ulster region and beyond will really benefit from having that kind of facility on their doorstep.

We are working with all the biggest companies in Northern Ireland — Coca-Cola, Moy Park, Dunbia, Linden Foods, Foyle Food Group, you name it — to ensure that, when supermarkets make enquiries about the product that they require, we are right up there in the packaging, provenance and viability of the food so that they can see the backup that there is in Northern Ireland. That is a real selling point and will provide a great opportunity for us as we go to more international markets. We recently broke into the American market for beef again after 20 years of being out of it. We will be getting into new markets. It is critical that we can sustain the businesses that are selling to those markets by having a qualitative backup, and that will exist.

**Ms Ennis:** I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. As was said many times yesterday, and I will reiterate today, agriculture is a key and valued part of our economy, and modern, fit for purpose educational facilities are key to its future. What assurances can the Minister give that disruption at CAFRE, and to the courses at Greenmount and Loughry, will be minimised over the next years?

**Mr Poots:** I can absolutely assure the Member that disruption will be at a minimum. There will be no disruption to the courses that are available.

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Minister for the welcome news of substantial investment in modernising the education and research facilities. In your statement, Minister, you said that the investment complements the recent launch of degrees in sustainable agriculture and horticulture. How many degree programmes are on offer, and how many places are on offer within them? Are there any further plans to expand sustainable education in the sector?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for the question. I cannot give you the exact figure, but I will correspond with you on it. On the latter part of the question, we will continue to work with the universities to ensure that CAFRE can deliver accredited courses to degree level. I want to open up further opportunities for that. I want to keep more young people in Northern Ireland for their third-level education. In my view, far too many young people have to travel to Great Britain and further afield for their third-level education. For some, leaving to study is a choice; for many others, it is not a choice because the opportunities do not exist in Northern Ireland. I am investing in young people and in young people's staying in Northern Ireland to be educated here. They can make their choices thereafter about what they wish to do with their lives, but let us ensure that we provide the best possible opportunities for them to be here.

**Mr Allister:** I welcome these investments. I want to ask an AFBI-specific question. AFBI's laboratory testing is very important to our food exports etc. To date, it has been fully accredited to the UK accreditation system. However, courtesy of the iniquitous protocol, the EU is now dictating that the UK accreditation service is no longer acceptable. That has caused AFBI, according to its board minutes, to consider linking to the Republic of Ireland for accreditation. Would that be acceptable to the Minister?

## 11.00 am

**Mr Poots:** The Member knows that the protocol per se is not acceptable to the Minister. We will do everything that we can, politically and legally, to ensure that we find ourselves in an acceptable position. An acceptable position is one that does not have blockages between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The protocol is bad for the economy. It is bad for consumers. It is bad for agriculture. Therefore, we need to continue to challenge it and to raise those issues at the highest level of government. I have been doing that. I will continue to do that. I will look at legal recourse that is completely different from the other legal remedies that have been sought. We must take every legitimate opportunity to ensure that Northern Ireland is not worse off as a consequence of the protocol, which did not involve the referendum that should have been required for the constitutional change that has been imposed upon Northern Ireland.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the news for Northern Ireland, particularly Loughry in my Mid Ulster constituency. Loughry has had a massive impact on agriculture and the food sector for the past 100 years. I worked in it for nearly a quarter of a century. You probably look at me and think that that could not be, but maybe others think that it could. It is dear to my heart. I noted the points made about the impact that it has had on the businesses that employ engineers, food workers production staff.

In the past 100 years, Loughry has had a massive impact. What of the next 100 years? I also ask the Minister for clarification. Some people think that Northern Ireland stops at Dundonald. There is more to Northern Ireland than Dundonald. Agriculture has a massive impact: if the agriculture sector has money, everybody has money.

**Mr Poots:** That has always been a saying. I heard it in the quarries and from the builders. When farming is doing well, we are all doing well. I want to ensure that farming does well and that we continue to invest in progress.

I know that the Member worked for many years in some of the leading facilities and was involved in cutting-edge work, making the plants capable of being competitive and ensuring that they were maintained to a standard that allowed them to deliver what the supermarket and commercial sectors demanded of them. It is absolutely critical. It is a highly pressurised business and having the qualified people in the workforce is critical. With the quality of training in Loughry and the agri-food sector, people can get good pay for doing their jobs. We need to continue to drive that. That is why the investment is critical to ensuring that we have the right people to support that magnificent industry.

When we go into the Senate Chamber, we see three industries remembered: linen, shipbuilding and agri-food. That reflects the positions of those industries in the 1920s. I hope that, when people go in there 100 years from now, the agriculture industry will still be powerful and leading-edge in Northern Ireland, not only on the farms but in the factories, with qualitative science supporting everything that we do, from the birth of an animal to the product ending up on someone's table.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Minister for his statement. There is no doubt that it is a significant act of confidence not only in our young people but in the wider agri-food sector, in

which my constituency of Upper Bann and my county of Armagh play a key role.

What change is envisaged in the blueprint across Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to AFBI, given these plans? Does he expect much change?

**Mr Poots:** AFBI cannot currently do accredited research into beef because its facilities have become so poor. The development will make a difference to AFBI by enabling it to do that research into beef, which can then be sold across the world.

AFBI is recognised across the world for the quality of its work. Some of its work on grass seed, for example, has led to it receiving royalties from significant companies across the world. It receives royalties from other countries because of its quality of research. We need to ensure that, as an organisation, it can continue to do that and to provide leading, cutting-edge research that can not only be utilised in Northern Ireland but be sold elsewhere to support further investment and research and to keep Northern Ireland at the cutting edge of agriculture and agri-food.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

*(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair)*

## Private Members' Business

### Autism Strategy

**Mr Gildernew:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes with deep concern that, by the end of 2020, almost 4,500 children across health and social care trusts were awaiting diagnosis for autism, with some reportedly waiting more than two years; recognises the distress and harm that this places on those awaiting diagnosis and tailored support services, as well as on their families; expresses its concern at the growing inequality of access to autism services and diagnosis; further notes the stark difference in waiting times across health and social care trusts; and calls on the Minister of Health to bring forward a longer-term strategy, to be progressed urgently in partnership with those with autism, their families, carers and community and voluntary sector organisations, to ensure equality of care and services that are free at the point of access and based on need.*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. As an amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for the debate. Please open the debate on the motion.

**Mr Gildernew:** I welcome the debate. I certainly hope that it engenders a sense of unity and purpose on what is an extremely difficult issue for many thousands of people in our community who struggle to access autism services or to deal with the lack of access even to the diagnosis process, let alone the supports that potentially should flow from it.

In the quarter ending in December 2020, 1,010 children were referred for an autism diagnosis, and 387 received a diagnosis. As of that date, 4,495 children were waiting for an autism assessment, and, of those, 1,457 had been waiting for over a year. Those 1,457 children came from three trust areas: the Belfast Trust, Northern Trust and Western Trust areas. It is important to remember that delays in receiving a diagnosis affect adults as well as children and young adults. At the end of February 2020, 997 adults were waiting for an adult autism assessment. Too often, the wait to get a diagnosis is just the first step; there is a lifetime of struggling ahead for the families of those with autism. Although the motion is focused on the unacceptable delays in getting an assessment and diagnosis, it is important for us all to remember that wider needs and pathway issues also need to be addressed. A longer-term strategy that is produced alongside those with autism and their families can directly influence the development of pre- and post-diagnostic support and intervention. We know that early intervention is key, but what hope is there for effective and successful early intervention services if the waiting list for a diagnosis stretches years into the future?

In April, Minister, you announced plans for rebuilding trusts and stated rightly:

*“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.”*

— [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 138, p13, col 2].

The answer is a simple no. As we can all see and know now, many citizens do not have access to the health services that they need, free at the point of access. Over the past number of months and weeks, in particular, I have heard countless stories of families being told that they face years on a waiting list but could get a diagnosis sooner if they went private. I have been working with the family of a young man in my constituency whose autism difficulties, while they were not emerging for the first time, became clear when he went to university. He is a capable young fella and had been top student in his school in fifth year. Pádraig and his parents struggled to get through the system and to get help. For context, his mother is a retired nurse and had been a nurse all her life; his father is a retired nursing lecturer. Both of them had time, resources and skills and knew the system, and they struggled. They have told me that they went into a very dark place as a family. I use that example just to highlight the fact that it affects many people. I hear that constantly. We hear constantly the analogy of people “battling” and “struggling” all the time with regard to autism services.

I highlighted that the 1,457 children who have been waiting over 52 weeks for an autism assessment came from only three of the trust areas. We must look at the element of it that is a postcode lottery and at how we can address that.

#### 11.15 am

Being forced to go private for an assessment adds another pressure on families and those with autism to fork out money that they simply may not have, so they borrow, which puts them into debt. Worryingly, there are also developing and increasing inequalities. Not only is the cost prohibitive and creating a two-tier service for those who can afford to go private but there is the growing postcode divide that I mentioned.

Ten years ago, the trusts did not accept a private diagnosis. I asked the Department how many private assessments or diagnoses for autism were accepted by each of the trusts and was told that that information was not collected. If we do not know the scale and extent of the problem, it is more difficult to develop the solution. I was shocked by that. An old business adage is, “What gets measured gets done”. I am concerned that, if we do not capture the growing extent of the problem, it will take longer and be harder to address. Not only are families being forced to wait longer but they should rightly expect to receive that diagnosis through their health service. The Department of Health does not have oversight of how many of those are accepted or what proportion of the accepted diagnoses is private. I urge the Minister to look into that issue and see whether he can examine whether the principle of healthcare being free at the point of need is being undermined, particularly in autism services.

I openly recognise and accept that COVID-19 has had an impact on the assessment services and supports that

are offered across the entire health service. For example, 670 children received a diagnosis of autism for the quarter ending March 2020: for each quarter after the start of the pandemic, the number was 133 up to June, 83 up to September and 387 up to December. Addressing the backlog of growing waiting lists is not an overnight fix, and everyone here recognises that. It is a complex issue, and I do not want to underplay or underscore the difficulties attached to that area of work.

Recently, I heard an example of a young girl with anxiety who faced a waiting list to access child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). The family went for a private assessment at a cost of £1,600, and, with that diagnosis, they progressed only as far as the next waiting list for the service. Mothers, fathers and families describe as exhausting the process of engaging with services and getting a diagnosis. It has been said to me in recent meetings, “We are not living; we are barely existing”. Other people said, “It is torture for us. We are stuck between a rock and a hard place” and, “Nobody listens, and nobody gives us any help”. Those are the comments that are coming back. That is one of the areas in which I hope that we can do something in the short term.

On the longer-term issues, I note that the Department published an interim autism strategy for 2021-22. It, however, has no measurable targets, which is important in light of what I said earlier. Also, we all probably query whether a two-year strategy can address the many long-standing issues that were not fully addressed by the previous strategy or by the Autism Act 2011. The motion calls on the Minister to bring forward a long-term strategy that involves families in a meaningful way in the design, production and delivery of services, putting those families at the centre of that entire process. I acknowledge that this is clearly an issue that affects much more than health services and more than the Department of Health. It will require other Departments to step forward, with the Department of Education being a key one. I urge the Minister and the Executive to look at the cross-departmental element of this and coordinate those services for people. At this point, however, it is not enough merely to report and acknowledge the problems. We need to see the figures, and we need to see how we can address the problems and create solutions.

I want to touch on carers today. Clearly, this has a massive impact on those caring for people with autism. For those who need support, it is often a family member or carer who provides the vast majority of that support. Over the past couple of months, I have met hundreds of people who are at breaking point. They are trying to support their loved ones in a situation where services have been withdrawn and additional pressure put on them, particularly around the difficulties that can be created as a result of autism. One mother described how her child, now in his twenties, is an adult whose needs are very different from when she started asking her local school for help. She will always consider him to be her child, and she will fight tooth and nail for those services.

However, it is exhausting for carers; trying to navigate their way through the system is wearing them down.

I welcome the amendment. I am very happy to support it and to work with everyone. I recognise that massive amounts of work have been done by Members for a long time on the issue. We need to look carefully at how we

address improvement. Clearly, some trusts are doing better than others. Can we adopt some of what they are doing and have a more strategic approach?

On communication and navigating the system, can we look, even in the short term, at providing a single point of contact for families so that they do not have to repeat their situation and story constantly and can access services? Some of those things might help in the interim.

**Mrs Cameron:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after the first "awaiting" and insert:*

*"a diagnostic assessment for autism, with some reportedly waiting more than two years, which exceeds the autism assessment standard of 13 weeks from the point of the initial referral; recognises the distress and harm that this places on those awaiting diagnosis and tailored support services, as well as on their families; expresses its concern at the growing inequality of access to autism services and diagnosis; further notes the stark difference in waiting times across health and social care trusts; and calls on the Minister of Health to bring forward a longer-term strategy that sets out measurable targets against which its successes may be assessed by an independent body, to be progressed urgently in partnership with those with autism, their families, carers and community and voluntary sector organisations, to ensure equality of care and services that are free at the point of access and based on need."*

**Mr Principal Deputy 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 wish to speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

**Mrs Cameron:** At the outset, I thank the Members opposite for tabling today's motion. I trust that they and, hopefully, the whole House will be able to support the amendment, which seeks to build on and strengthen the original wording of the motion on such an important topic.

As chair of the all-party group (APG) on autism, I am deeply concerned about the many issues that face the autism community today. Since the Autism Act in 2011, it is true to say that things have got worse rather than better for autistic families and adults in Northern Ireland. Advocacy organisations such as Autism NI have worked hard over the past 15 years and have lobbied our Executive relentlessly. They report back to the all-party group on autism regularly about the lack of autism support services. Current waiting times for an autism diagnosis are completely unacceptable. A complete overhaul of the current assessment process is urgently needed. It is hard to believe that some families are waiting for over two years to gain an assessment for their child and that some adults are waiting for up to four years. That is a complete travesty. There are disparities among the five trusts. According to the latest figures, the Belfast Trust and the Northern Trust have consistently had children and adults waiting the longest time for an assessment. On the other hand, the Southern Trust and the South Eastern Trust are able to provide an autism assessment within the recommended 13 weeks. Why is that?

From my consultations with autism families and autistic individuals over the years, I understand how important it is to access timely interventions and tailored supports.

However, the only way to access those interventions and supports is through gaining a diagnosis. Many families and individuals feel that they have no choice but to seek a private diagnosis and pay for it themselves, which costs up to £1,400. With a private diagnosis, families and individuals can access supports straight away, while those on the NHS waiting lists wait for years for those same supports. Inevitably, that is causing inequalities in the Northern Ireland health system, and it cannot be ignored any longer. No family should be disadvantaged due to its economic status, but that is what the rise in private diagnosis is causing. I also emphasise that the prevalence of autism is 37% higher in deprived areas compared with the Northern Ireland average.

I will read out a recent case example from a parent with two children who have a diagnosis of autism:

*"My daughter, aged seven, was diagnosed with autism at four years old through the trust after being on the waiting list for one and a half years. However, my son, aged three, was diagnosed privately only last week as I couldn't wait any longer to access supports. This has cost me thousands of pounds, but I'm very fortunate to have had help from family, but I know many parents who are at breaking point out there because they cannot do that. This is just heartbreaking."*

It has to be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a particularly difficult time for our autism community. Some autism support services stopped completely during the period. The unexpected changes, such as the closure of schools and workplaces, has had a detrimental impact on anxiety levels and the emotional well-being of so many autistic people.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Member for giving way and for her amendment. I recognise that this is, basically, a health motion. The Member has just mentioned the closure of schools. If we are to address autism and allow those young people, in particular, to maximise their potential in society, surely we need a strategy that is health-oriented and education-oriented. Only when we get that joined-up approach from the two relevant Departments will the young people diagnosed be able to take their full place in society by maximising their potential and playing a full role. At the moment, we are tending to let them down.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I completely agree. Without a doubt, it is a cross-departmental issue that needs much concentration across the entirety of government.

It was recently reported that, owing to the pandemic, 63% of autistic young people have stated that their mental health has got worse. Some 79% of autistic adults have stated that they feel socially isolated because of the pandemic. Two thirds of autistic young people have stated that they did not receive any support during lockdown. It feels as though that community is so easily forgotten about when it comes to remembering it at the most important of times. That is the reason that I have dedicated so much of my time to supporting our autistic community through my role on the all-party group on autism.

I put on record my thanks to the cross-party membership of the APG and give a special thank-you to Autism NI for the vast amount of work that it has done to date and for its continued provision of a secretariat to the group. Since

the pandemic, the APG has continued to meet monthly virtually. In those meetings, we have learnt from Autism NI — a charity dealing with the current autism crisis on the front line — about the many issues that affect the autism community. Autism NI has repeatedly reported to the group that there needs to be better investment in autism services and that the current autism strategy is not fit for purpose.

From what I have heard in my constituency, I completely agree with that narrative. From my own examination of what has unfolded since the Autism Act came in 10 years ago, it is clear to see that the autism strategy from 2013 to 2020 and the resulting action plans have failed. That failure is evidenced by the fact that only one out of three action plans was completed in the period and that there has been no independent review of its success, outside of the Department's internal reviews.

For that reason, and for all the aforementioned reasons, with the full support of the all-party group on autism, I have sponsored a private Member's Bill (PMB), the aim of which is to strengthen the Autism Act by introducing an independent scrutiny mechanism to drive forward the regional implementation of key services through the existing autism legislation. The autism PMB will address the lack of accountability, independent scrutiny and transparency that has curtailed the potential of key elements of the current legislation.

Those issues were highlighted in the PMB's public consultation process, which attracted in excess of 1,800 responses back in October 2020. Indeed, that public consultation received more responses than any other legislative consultation on a private Member's Bill in Northern Ireland's history. That shows the level of concern in the autism community and among professionals over the need for legislative action to deliver a system that works for autistic individuals and their families.

The issues that are to be addressed in the private Member's Bill include the introduction of an independent body that will review the autism strategy. That is key to ensuring that targets are met and adhered to. That was reinforced in the public consultation, as 92% of respondents supported the need for an independent scrutiny mechanism. They believe that, for autism services, scrutiny, transparency and research are currently inadequate.

Another aspect of the private Member's Bill will be to introduce a cross-departmental autism training strategy. That was reinforced by 95% of consultation respondents stating that having accredited autism training, particularly in the areas of education and health and social care, would deliver better outcomes for the autism community. Support for autism services also registered as a significant area of concern in the consultation, with over 94% of respondents stating that adult services, including for supported living, employment and emotional well-being were top concerns. The private Member's Bill will therefore have a specific focus on the provision of consistent adult autism services.

The evidence that was provided to the public consultation also reaffirms the issues that will be raised in today's debate and supports the need for greater consistency in assessment and post-diagnostic services across trusts. I hope that the private Member's Bill will have its First Stage in the very near future.

Finally, with the latest autism statistics to be presented by the Department of Health over the next few days, the contents of the report will no doubt provide another wake-up call for us all.

The current situation is nowhere near good enough, and the autism community deserves so much better. Autistic children and adults are a vibrant part of our community. They are our friends, neighbours, colleagues and family, and they deserve to have the same rights, support services and opportunities as every other person in Northern Ireland. They certainly should not be at a disadvantage because they are autistic. However, the current system is letting them down, and it is up to us as public representatives to change that. We cannot keep turning a blind eye to those very real issues. It is not fair and it is not right, and it is up to us to make the changes and make a more inclusive society for everyone.

### 11.30 am

We have a huge opportunity to make a real difference. I therefore hope that you will give my private Member's Bill the support that it needs when it finally progresses to its First Stage. It goes without saying that I absolutely support all the issues raised in today's motion.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** From this point on, Members will have five minutes each, although if they take an intervention, they will get an extra minute.

**Ms Hunter:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate in my role as my party's health spokesperson. I support the motion and the amendment, and I thank the Members who moved them.

This is an important and much-needed debate. The figures stated in the motion really do speak for themselves. I think that we all know or love someone who either has autism or, unfortunately, is waiting for a crucial assessment. At the end of last year, almost 4,500 children in Northern Ireland were awaiting an autism diagnosis, which is shocking, and almost of one quarter of them were in the Western Trust, which falls into my constituency.

Personally, someone very close to me has the most wonderful son, who is of primary-school age and has been left without an assessment for over two years. I have witnessed first-hand how delays contribute to the detriment of a child's mental health, confidence and overall well-being and the real, tangible isolation that they feel in and outside the classroom.

Ahead of today's debate, Autism NI circulated a briefing to all Members, and it makes for stark and concerning reading. I thank Autism NI for its commitment to bettering the lives of those with an autism diagnosis and to supporting their families. The report includes the disparity in waiting times between the different trust areas and the health inequalities that are arising as a result of the waiting lists, with some families, as mentioned previously, able to afford a private diagnosis, while others simply cannot. That is a very sad reality when we note that an early assessment can help to shape the lives of people with autism and contribute to their living happy, healthy and independent lives.

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Member for giving way. Many of those who have an autism diagnosis have a dual diagnosis with ADHD, and many people are also waiting for an



ADHD diagnosis. I asked a question of the Department, and it would appear that the Department does not hold any records of the numbers of people who have been diagnosed with ADHD. Does the Member agree that, if there is to be a strategy and resources to challenge those conditions, we at least need to know how many people have them and where they live so that we can direct them to the services?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Ms Hunter:** Thank you. I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, I think that it is crucial to keep the numbers. I note that, in my constituency, a number of parents have raised the fact that it has been difficult to find support, especially during COVID-19.

I was particularly concerned to note that there has been an increase in the number of people with autism over the past 10 years, with one in 24 children of school age having a diagnosis. Nearly 20,000 people in Northern Ireland have autism, which is one in every 100 people. The conversations that we have today have the power to change lives. That is really important.

I have spoken here on a number of occasions about the impact of COVID-19 on overall well-being. I think that our children are among the most affected, and I am deeply concerned about what it will all mean for them. I fear for children who may have been left behind when they were not in school over the pandemic and who may have autism but their teacher was not there to witness the signs and symptoms. I am sure that that adds a great sense of uncertainty not just for the children themselves but for their families and carers.

I call on the Minister and his Department, in conjunction with the Minister of Education, to work together through the Children's Services Co-Operation Act to bring forward a longer-term strategy and, in doing so, to work with those who have autism, their families and carers, and the community and voluntary sector to ensure equality of care and services that are free at the point of need.

To conclude, I would like to put on record my support and that of my party for those young people and their families. I hope that we will soon see a strategy forthcoming from the Department.

**Mr Chambers:** These past 15 months have been a difficult period for us all, but the pandemic has brought particular challenges both for young people and older people who ordinarily would have taken comfort from daily routine and structure. There is no doubt that autism services have never been under as much strain as they currently are, like so many parts of our health and social care system. However, they were already struggling long before COVID, and this is an issue that has transcended the terms of many Executive Ministers. For instance, in September 2016, when the current deputy First Minister was the Health Minister, 2,325 children were waiting for an autism spectrum assessment. Whilst that was, obviously, lower than it is today, the reality is that it was four times the number waiting, only five years before, in 2011.

It is clear that autism services, like so many other services, fell victim to a decade-long period of underinvestment and lack of strategic direction. Of course, many people with a diagnosis of autism still live life to the full and reach great

heights and potential. The challenge is getting that initial diagnosis. It is widely accepted that early intervention is far more cost-effective, but, even more importantly, it is beneficial for young people. Receiving a timely diagnosis can enable parents to better understand their child and ensure that they have access to crucial help and support. That is especially important because autism can often have a huge impact on family life. Delays often rob children and young people of the support that they need, and, if and when it does come, that support can be too little or too late.

We are all agreed that there is an undoubted problem. The current model of autism services is wholly unsustainable. That is what happens when demand far exceeds capacity. This is something that I have heard the Minister speak of before, so I know that he is acutely aware of it. The interim strategy, earlier this year, will, I hope, help, but what we need most is sustained investment to recruit additional permanent staff in order to improve the waiting list position. In the meantime, noting the disparity across trusts, perhaps an interim step could be the facilitation of the assessment of children in some trust areas being undertaken in other areas where the service is not under such pressure. This is a new approach that the Minister has already introduced for some other key services, so perhaps it is worth considering in the interim.

As I have said, I know that the Minister is acutely aware of the issues raised by this motion and the debate today. I am confident that he will be doing all within his power to seek improvement in delivery of autism services going forward. However, adequate, long-term and ring-fenced funding for our NHS has never been more vital than it is now. The Ulster Unionist Party will support this motion and the amendment.

**Ms Bradshaw:** First, I thank the proposer of the motion for tabling it today and for outlining the great difficulty that people are having in the wait for diagnostic assessments, the degree to which there is a postcode lottery and the objective of a longer-term co-design strategy. I do not see how anyone would have any difficulty with it. Secondly, I thank the proposer of the amendment. We feel that it delivers a greater degree of precision, both to the issue itself and to our ask in this motion. As the debate goes on, and possibly afterwards, I will be interested to hear more detail about what the independent body would be about, but I have no difficulty with it in principle.

The motion is timely because, of course, for people with autism and their families, the pandemic has been a disproportionately stressful experience. They have been impacted to a greater degree by isolation and loneliness, which, in itself, is a topic worthy of specific intervention from the Executive. They have seen statutory requirements around support intentionally weakened by, in part, the emergency COVID legislation, and, in many cases, they have seen a seriously detrimental effect on their ability to work full time or to progress in education.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I hope that you will give me a little leeway to point out that a longer-term strategy will not be confined to the Department of Health, although, naturally, it will be the lead Department. On asking one family affected by autism for their views ahead of this debate, the response was immediate. They want improved pathways for school leavers. Specific support to get into employment and specific awareness-raising in the workplace, and even in leisure pursuits, would make a

significant difference to people who live with autism. As I said in the recent debate on palliative care, not everything around autism or other conditions should revolve around healthcare appointments. It is about allowing people to live their lives to the full.

We should also be clear that we are not talking about some fringe issue. Over 4% of schoolchildren in Northern Ireland are known to have autism to a greater or lesser extent. The point is that this figure could be much higher if we were able to diagnose autism more effectively. We are seeing something which is sadly typical of what is now a two-tier health service. As with so many areas of health, those with means and money can go private and get a diagnosis far faster, thus being able to make the relevant adaptations and seek the relevant support earlier. This is not a service that is universal and free at the point of access. It is not universal if not everyone can access it, and it is not free at the point of access if, in practice, some can pay for a faster service. I repeat the point that I have made often: those who seek a universal health service free at the point of access need to recognise that this means not supporting but opposing the status quo, and instead supporting urgent and swift transformation, so that a family's income does not determine access.

That reinforces why it is essential to have in place the figure of 13 weeks. We have people with means who are able to move faster, but there is also a clear postcode lottery, as others have mentioned. A first appointment will take 10 weeks in the South Eastern Trust area, on the fringe of my constituency, yet people within that constituency will potentially wait over a year. Under the Autism Act, and indeed under the basic principles of universal health provision, how can that be acceptable? As a side note, I support the Minister and Department of Health's move towards regional prioritisation waiting lists for some aspects of healthcare as we move through the pandemic. It is an approach that we should explore for other avenues of healthcare, not least this one.

The postcode lottery only complicates the crossover into ensuring adequate provision in schools, training for teachers, and support for pathways into employment, housing and so on. Let me emphasise that, when we speak of a diagnosis of autism, it should not be seen as a negative or thought of in terms of disadvantage, but rather in the joy of seeing diversity and difference.

I place on record my support and thanks to Sólás, which provides an amazing service for families in South Belfast; Autism Initiatives, for its great resource in Carryduff; and Autism NI, for its work in advocacy on this issue. I appeal directly to the Health Minister and the Executive to provide those organisations with adequate long-term funding. One of the groups I have just mentioned has 17 or 18 open funding programmes at the minute, and that is no way to run a service when you are trying to provide front-line support to children.

**Mr McHugh:** I offer my support to the proposers of the motion and the amendment.

Some time ago, I had my first meeting with a parent of a young adult who is autistic. I am sure that his condition would have been described as at the severe end of autism. He struggles daily, and so too do his mother, father and siblings in that home. His mother broke down in tears in my office as she described to me the daily struggle and

the feelings of helplessness in dealing with it. She did not know where to turn, received no support, cried out for respite and was sick to death with worry, as she did not know what would be the future for her son in the event that she was no longer in the picture. That was such a concern for her.

The mother explained to me that this has always seemed to be the case.

She had to fight tooth and nail every step of the way throughout her child's schooling to get him what little support was available. Now, as he is a young adult, his needs are different. As parents, we know that, although they grow up, in many respects our children are just big children but with very different needs who constantly need the support of their parents. That young man's needs are different, and his mother is still fighting and facing the same insurmountable hurdles in her attempts to attend not only to the needs of her son but to the needs of the family in coping with his condition.

#### 11.45 am

My heart went out to that mother. As we talked through the issues, it became obvious that she was not alone in experiencing such a dearth in provision, so much so that it caused me to take an initiative. I posted on Facebook and held a Zoom meeting in order to look in particular at provision in West Tyrone, which is the constituency that I represent. I was inundated with enquiries from providers, parents and school representatives who all wished to join in the meeting. If I was moved during the first meeting that I had with that lady, I was not prepared for the intensity of the criticism from those who attended the Zoom meeting. I was shocked in every respect at what they outlined to me. They criticised the Health and Social Care Board, the Western Trust, the Department of Education and even our council for the lack of facilities that they provide for those who are autistic.

Diagnostic testing is one issue that has been highlighted today. Although there is much criticism of the lack of diagnostic testing and the fact that people very often have to pay for it, many of the people who I talked to said that the bodies that they dealt with recognised diagnostic testing as being the service when it should be only the very first step and the services should be provided on the basis of the result of a diagnostic test.

It is accepted, particularly in the case of autism, that early diagnostic testing is so important. I was glad to hear the comment that was made about a child of three years of age who had been tested. That should also be a primary objective in the system for our preschool children so that they have the same opportunity. The parent probably knows before the test is ever carried out that their child is autistic.

Parents identified a total lack of long-term planning and training for the workers who engage with those who have autism. Whether it was the Western Trust OTs or whoever, the parents felt that training was missing.

There is a lack of employment opportunities for those who have been diagnosed with autism. They go through the school system and come out the other end to, all of a sudden, find that there is no support service for them. Previously, employers were encouraged with support grants to employ people with autism —.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am sorry, but the Member's time is up.

**Mr McHugh:** My apologies. I would like to very quickly get to the point, which is that society is judged by how it protects its most vulnerable. In our case, we are letting down those who have autism, and we should respond to that immediately.

**Mr McNulty:** I support the motion and the amendment. Let us imagine a world without people with autism. There would be no Sir Isaac Newton, no Hans Christian Andersen, no Charles Darwin, no WB Yeats, no Daryl Hannah, no Albert Einstein, no Mozart and no James Joyce. What a dull, boring, undiscovered, grey and dismal world it would be.

Autism is not a disease; it is a disability.

No one, let alone a child with a disability, should be disadvantaged or left behind by a state or system that is supposed to care for them, nurture them and support them.

As I speak on this important issue, I am proud of my south Armagh SDLP predecessors. Autism NI described the 2011 Act as:

*"the most comprehensive piece of single disability legislation in Europe".*

I acknowledge the great work of Dominic Bradley, a Bessbrook man, who brought forward that legislation with the support of others and the team in Autism NI. I also acknowledge Crossmaglen man John Fee, RIP, who was the first person to table a motion on autism in the Assembly. Sadly, though, there has been a failure by the Department of Health to implement the autism strategy and its subsequent action plans. The Autism Act 2011 is current and binding. It is the responsibility of the Executive to ensure that the autism strategy is fulfilled, that it is outcomes-based and that it can be measured and benchmarked. That has not happened. If we continue to fail children with autism, we continue to fail as a society.

My heart goes out to the Members who have described their personal experiences with autism. It is important to recognise that the impact of autism is not just on the child with autism; there is a ripple effect on their immediate and extended families, friends and neighbours. That ripple effect must be addressed, and that will come through doing the right thing for children and families who are dealing with autism. One in 24 school-age children has autism: that is one in every class. Some 78% of those children are in mainstream education. Continuing to fail those children fails a large section of our society.

For a parent to seek help for their son or daughter is not easy. It can be trying or difficult for a parent to cope. However, meeting bureaucracy and brick walls only adds to the pain, the frustration and the sense of abandonment. Any parent will go to the ends of the earth to ensure that their son or daughter has everything that they need and deserve. They know that their son or daughter needs additional support, and they get justifiably frustrated when they are met only with delay after delay. Those who have the financial wherewithal then turn to the private sector for assessments. They do so out of sheer want to do the best for their children, and so they should, but what about the

families and children who do not have the finances to go private? Therein lies the health inequality.

As a member of the Education Committee, I have heard many stories from advocacy groups such as Autism NI and the Children's Law Centre and educationalists. The Committee has had the Education Authority (EA) before it. To the EA's credit, it is implementing improvements, but it cannot do it alone; it needs more support.

As a constituency MLA, I have been contacted by many parents about their trials and frustrations in accessing services. The trust in my area is, to its credit, better than most, but I do not accept that that is the best that we can do. Parents and children deserve better, and we need to see significant changes. We need better and quicker access to diagnostic services and the support services that come with a diagnosis. We need a better, more joined-up approach across the system. We need to stop failing our young people with autism and their families. We need more support in education and healthcare and in supported employment opportunities. We need to recognise that young people with autism can rock the world and make it a better place, be it in music, the arts, science or literature. Let their only limitation be the limit of their ambition.

**Ms Armstrong:** I might not take my full five minutes. Everyone here acknowledges that we need to do better for people with autism. We need to do better for all people with disabilities.

In 2016, I had the privilege of sitting in the Public Gallery when my former colleague and predecessor, Kieran McCarthy, presented a petition signed by over 8,000 people asking for more investment to deal with diagnoses and waiting lists. The then Health Minister, Simon Hamilton, allocated £2 million per year, and I am delighted that that funding has continued.

What has happened since then? How can we help you, Minister? Is there a need for a clear cross-cutting theme in the next Programme for Government to support all those with the various types of learning disabilities?

I am not here to talk about failing people with autism; I am here to talk about failing all of us, particularly our health workers. They face enormous waiting lists, and those waiting lists are getting bigger and bigger, because the better we are at diagnosing and recognising autism, the more people are being added to those lists.

How do we make improvements? As Mr Gildernew said, some health trusts are doing this better than others, so let us look at what they do differently. Autism NI and the National Autistic Society (NAS) have pointed out that there is a significant difference between rural and urban people and how diagnoses happen. Why is that? Why are rural people not able to get as many diagnoses? Is it because rural people do not get autism? We know that that is not the case. We need to think about that. Do we need more autism clinicians? A Member mentioned training. We need more training, because the people who are doing the job got into it because they wanted to help people. They want to cure people; they want to make them better. We need to give them the training to do that. We also need to increase the number of clinicians. Does that mean giving the Health Minister more money? What is the cost for all of us of late diagnoses? What does that cost society? What does it cost our education system? What has been achieved from the

progress report? What has the autism strategy done? The commercial sector has, in fact, improved things a lot more than we have as politicians. Exploris, for instance, in my area, has an autism afternoon, and some supermarkets have autism times, when the lights are better and the sound is turned down for people who want to go in.

We all want early diagnosis to be uniform across all trusts, but we must not forget that it is not just children who have autism. Let us not forget the number of adults who are faced with issues on which other Departments do not seem to pick up. For instance, people who are going forward for personal independence payment (PIP) appeals are being presented with the option of a video or telephone appeal system. Honestly? Why is learning disability treated so badly? Why are the systems not improved to meet the needs of people with autism and people with learning disabilities?

I do not envy the Minister. I say that because, even if the waiting lists were resolved, there would still be a massive issue. That is why I mentioned the Programme for Government. We can all say that we need this and we need that, but let us do it. Let us go back to the Programme for Government. Let us look at where we put the investment, and let us get a move on. How many times do we need to say that we are failing children with autism? We should be saying that we are making lives better for children with autism and looking at how we are getting to that point.

I support the motion's call for a longer-term autism strategy. I have no problem in supporting the amendment, but I ask the proposers of the amendment to confirm who the independent body is. Let us not take any money away from autism services by putting it into another body. Let us make sure that we invest in our young people and in the people in our health service who help them. Let us make sure that we change things. We cannot talk about this any more. I am delighted that a private Member's Bill is coming through on autism. The Autism Mummies, with whom I am in regular contact, cannot wait to see that. They have responded to Pam. We need £2 million a year to stand still. It is not working. We need more, so let us invest in it. Let us make it a key priority that people with learning disabilities and all types of disabilities are prioritised in the next Programme for Government.

**Ms Bailey:** I thank Kellie Armstrong. They were wise words. She made a sensible call, because it is alarming to see the length of time that some children wait for an autism diagnosis and even more alarming when you realise the disparity across the health trusts. We all have cases that we could raise or, perhaps, personal experiences to draw from — maybe both.

The waiting list debacle has been raised, the postcode lottery has been highlighted, the stats have been read out loud, and the overworked and overburdened organisations have been named, but, of course, the issue goes beyond the Department of Health and the waiting lists for assessments. I should not have to remind the Executive parties here that their Ministers have a duty placed on them by the Green Party's Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015.

Unfortunately, to date, we have seen little evidence of Departments working together to deliver services aimed at children and young people, and the need for that to

happen is so much greater when we are talking about autistic children and young people. Along with the Autism Act, the Children's Services Co-operation Act creates a clear legislative framework for the provision of effective autism services. Instead, however, we have developed a system in which it is a constant battle just to get the most basic interventions that children need.

#### 12.00 noon

Over the years, we have all spoken to countless parents who are tired. They are tired, frustrated and angry, because every single step has been a struggle. They should not have to fight so hard for something that should be there. They have had to fight to get their children an assessment, to get them statemented, to get the right supports in place, to get help with school transition and to get adult services. The fight is never-ending. It is us who are failing children and their families. I note that the Minister of Health has brought forward an interim strategy for autism for 2021-22. Although it is welcome, it is simply not enough, and we all know that, including the Minister.

Delivering the services needed and responding to the calls made in the motion and the amendment will take the commitment of every Minister in the Executive, so please work with your own Ministers and get them to step up as well. We need the other Departments — Education, Economy, Communities, Justice — to swing into action and ensure the joined-up provision of services and supports. I am keen to hear from the Minister today about how those Departments are working together, in line with the Children's Services Co-operation Act, to deliver services that are needed. Young lives are at risk, and young lives are being lost. It is happening on our watch.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** No other Members have indicated to me that they wish to speak. I therefore call the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, to respond to the debate.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I welcome the proposal in the motion, that in the amendment and Members' contributions today. The debate provides me with an opportunity to acknowledge publicly that I am acutely aware of the considerable challenges being experienced by individuals and families on waiting lists for autism assessments. I remind Members that the situation is unfortunately not unique to autism. As recently as Tuesday 13 April, I made a statement in the House in which I mentioned our "absolutely dire waiting lists". I said that the pandemic had highlighted fragilities in our health and social care system and acknowledged that one of the casualties is autism, which is being highlighted here today.

I realise that, if a child is waiting for an autism assessment for a significant length of time, that may impact on its emotional health and well-being, personal development and education. That is not acceptable. For the family of that child, it can impact on how they live, how they support their child and, indeed, any other children in the home, and all that without having the necessary information and, in a lot of cases, no additional support. That is not acceptable. For those adults who may have experienced lifelong challenges in their social interaction and in their ability to communicate and interact with their environment and who have taken the decision to seek assessment and obtain support that could make a positive difference to their life, that is not acceptable. That has been highlighted so many

times by the personal and constituency examples and stories recounted by nearly all MLAs in today's debate.

I said in my statement on 13 April that we must put waiting lists right, and that includes for autism. In supporting individuals, children and families, we all have a responsibility to work together, which Ms Bailey's contribution highlighted. Given the prevalence of autism today, we should no longer expect autistic people, their families, and those awaiting assessment to adapt to society. We also have a collective responsibility to increase understanding and to prepare society to adapt to and understand the needs of children and adults with autism and their families.

Today's debate raises the question of bringing forward a longer-term autism strategy. I want to take this opportunity to share my rationale for publishing an interim strategy, setting out my immediate plans. I also want to advise how I intend to proceed with the development of a longer-term strategy that can provide actions that will make a difference to lives. Many of you are aware, and many have mentioned, that the Autism Act places a legislative requirement on my Department to prepare a cross-departmental autism strategy. That was mentioned by many Members today. Also mentioned was the pivotal and important role that education plays. The previous autism strategy came to an end in December 2020. Although it achieved much and significantly raised the profile of autism as a condition, there is a lot of work still to be done.

In preparation for the development of a revised strategy, the focus of my officials has been to listen to the voices of those who matter most: autistic people, their families and carers, and the community and voluntary sector that represents them and works tirelessly to provide advice and support. From that engagement, a clear sense emerged of the priorities that families and individuals wanted to see addressed through a strategy. Those priorities included Health and Education working more closely together, which was mentioned many times today, and we will do that; greater provision for early intervention and standardised regional services, with equity of access across the region, and we will strive to achieve that; accessibility to mental health services through a mental health strategy, and we will improve that; greater awareness and understanding of the needs of autistic people in our workforce, services, communities and families, and we will work in partnership with the relevant bodies to increase that understanding.

We were also told that actions, not words, were needed. To determine how priorities can be addressed, my officials participated in forums with health and social care clinicians, who are dedicated to providing support and interventions specific to individual needs. They heard first-hand about the challenges experienced with managing waiting lists and about how those clinicians are already working to improve that. My officials also worked across Departments, including Education, to determine how autistic people are being supported by and considered in the delivery of our services, as well as to identify actions that could make a real difference to their lives and to the lives of their families. Through participation in multi-agency autism forums in trust areas, they spoke to members of our local councils to hear more about the work being undertaken as they strive to become autism-friendly areas

and about how public services are implementing actions to provide appropriate support.

That work, and much more, has demonstrated where my priorities for an autism strategy should lie. However, as we have said in so many debates and Question Times throughout the past year, no one could have prepared us for the impact that COVID-19 would have on our lives and on how services would have to be delivered. As the impact of the pandemic heightened and public guidelines and restrictions were put in place, autism services in our trusts had to take the difficult decision to cease delivery of elements of the autism assessment. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that that would have a significant impact on waiting lists, which were already growing.

A crucial element of the autism assessment is built on observation. It is known as the autism diagnostic observation schedule (ADOS) and provides a structured, standardised method of assessment of communication, social interaction and behaviours. Throughout the pandemic, that assessment could not be delivered due to the social-distancing and public health guidance measures. As the assessment is undertaken in close proximity, the impact of PPE on the individual could render the assessment invalid.

Aware of the need to continue delivery of these services and that support, autism services in our trusts investigated alternative solutions, both nationally and internationally, to implement methods of assessment that would be compliant with the requirements of NICE guidance. I commend them for their efforts and commitment in implementing alternative methods of support and interventions through digital platforms, clinical helplines and provision of resources to all those in need, regardless of diagnosis or not.

However, the reality of the impact on waiting lists in some areas has been realised, and I have no doubt that the situation has influenced the tabling of the motion today, and understandably so. As I have previously said, all waiting lists must be addressed, and that includes those for autism, whether it is for an assessment or for the delivery of services and support to individuals and their families.

**Mr Chambers:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Swann:** I will.

**Mr Chambers:** Minister, how much more difficulty does a one-year Budget present to your Department in dealing with the long-term challenges that you are trying to address?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. It does present challenges. Kellie Armstrong clearly demonstrated in her contribution how the challenges that Health has, or that members of our society have, with what has happened over the past year have been additionally compounded by that one-year Budget. It is no fault of this House. It is no derogation of the responsibility of this House. I have heard, from every party in this Chamber, their commitment to a recurrent Budget, if not for everywhere then especially for Health, to allow us to address that.

Throughout the past year, we have all had to change our routines and the way in which we live our lives. The stark reality of how this impacts on people who may have been diagnosed with autism or who are waiting on assessment

has been drawn to my attention in this House by many Members on many occasions. The routines and structures that provide coping mechanisms for many — schools, familiar locations and people and, of course, respite care and short breaks — were all withdrawn or limited at a time when families experienced great need. Whilst these were difficult and, for many, unpopular decisions, we all know that they were vital to control the spread of the virus and protect everyone in society, especially our most vulnerable.

Whilst I am aware of the pressures on our health and social care systems as we address the emerging priorities of the pandemic, I am also aware that, as a result, the development of a new long-term autism strategy for implementation has been severely constrained. In considering options, I was mindful of the challenges that had been experienced by children, adults and their families throughout the pandemic. I was conscious of the efforts placed upon identifying the priorities and actions that had been identified in preparation for the development of an autism strategy. I wanted to enable a direction of travel to be set as we rebuild our services.

I also wanted to acknowledge the voices of the people who had contributed so much to influencing and shaping the outcomes that the strategy will set out to achieve. Therefore, I took a decision to publish an interim autism strategy to set out priorities for outcome-based actions for 2021 and 2022 that will align with the Programme for Government. Again, I thank Kellie Armstrong and Clare Bailey for their offers of support and encouragement — and that was received from all Members across the House — on how we do this, not just as Health alone but with all of us working together to support those who need it most. To do that, I wrote to my Executive colleagues and our Health Committee in October 2020 to advise them of my intention to bring together the outcomes of the preparatory work and engagement undertaken in the publication of an interim strategy, which would ultimately inform the development of a fully co-produced autism strategy to commence later in 2021. That would ensure that the implementation of actions would not be delayed at a time when need has never been greater, and I can assure you that I am committed to that and that those plans are commencing.

You will be aware that the vision of the interim strategy is to respect, to listen and to involve. In underpinning my commitment to the inclusion of autistic people, their families and carers and our community and voluntary representatives in shaping and developing the strategy, my Department has established an autism forum. That forum met for the first time on 28 April to determine its role, and further engagement is planned to determine our focus for a longer-term strategy, how we will work in partnership to develop and co-produce that and how we will monitor and evaluate the actions emerging from it.

My officials will present the options that emerge from the forum to me, and I assure Members that, when plans are in place, I will keep the House apprised.

### 12.15 pm

I understand, in publishing the strategy, that Members and the public that we serve will expect a road map to improvement: that is what we all want to see. However, in the current climate, we must also manage our expectations

of what can be achieved. Whilst we are optimistic that we are heading into a more positive climate that we hope to be able to refer to as “post-COVID”, our services must recover and rebuild. The interim strategy sets the plans for our actions in motion and provides a direction of travel as we emerge into a post-pandemic world. My officials will continue to keep the work under review.

In recent weeks, media attention has highlighted the lengths to which many families have gone in seeking private assessment in light of our current waiting lists for autism assessment. While that is a personal decision for some families, it is a prohibitive one for many. I do not want systems and services where families feel that they must take that route: I want equity in our systems. I want equity in services that are free, based on need and accessible to all. I want children to have the best start in life and to get the support that they need and the education that they deserve, not one that is dependent on or defined by a diagnosis. I want individuals — children and adults — and their families to feel supported, included and understood in the communities in which they live. It is not just about waiting lists and services but about building a longer-term vision in which we respect others and work together to bring about change in the outcomes for good.

**Mr Buckley:** I do not rise to add to the debate, because Members across the Chamber have spoken eloquently in their desire to tackle the growing crisis in autism waiting lists in Northern Ireland. I thank the Members who tabled the motion and those who have indicated support for the amendment.

The statistics speak in their own right. Everybody has touched on a different statistic that can alarm us all. For me, the key statistic was the prevalence of autism in our most deprived communities — 37% higher than the Northern Ireland average — which goes right to the heart of what we aim to address through the motion. When we combine the autism statistics from a pre-COVID environment with waiting lists that have been compounded by COVID, the statistics are startling. At 31 December 2020, 4,495 children were waiting for an autism assessment. Members have rightly put on record ways in which we can address those disturbing statistics. The postcode lottery in the provision of services, both rural and urban, that has been mentioned should also be seen to be addressed by the House.

We fully endorse the aim of the motion, which is to address the rising inequalities in care and services for children with autism in Northern Ireland. However, we need to see much more than another toothless or aspirational strategy. We need practical and immediate solutions to the mounting number of autism assessments and care inequalities. I thank the Minister for his comments about ways in which the Department can help to address those in the immediate term. There needs to be a clear and detailed road map for clearing the backlog of autism assessments across all trusts. The delays cause undue stress, distress and uncertainty to each child and family involved, who wait to receive tailored support. We must see ambitious time frames for addressing those waiting lists.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Member for giving way. The amendment calls for a longer-term strategy, to which the Member has just referred. Most Members have indicated that, primarily, that would involve the Health and Education Departments.

However, is there not another very important part of the jigsaw that is missing? We really need to see investment and the Finance Minister playing his part to address the problem along with the Health and Education Ministers.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member will be pleased to hear that, because we are running ahead, I can give him an extra minute.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Principal Deputy Speaker. I agree with the point raised by my colleague. Clare Bailey put on record the need for that joined-up approach. If we are to deal with this in the long-term way that Members envisage and see the need for, there will have to be that joined-up approach. We have to recognise that it is an issue not just for Health but for every Department, including Education, Finance, Communities and even DAERA, as mentioned, given the disparity between rural and urban. There is a part for them all to play in ensuring that we cater for people right across our communities in dealing with the scourge of autism and helping them to come forward and receive the support that they need. There was mention of notable people with autism, some of whom I did not even realise were people with autism, who have contributed to and played a fantastic role in our society and had a real impact on Northern Ireland and, indeed, the world.

There can be no substitute for face-to-face assessment. Whilst digital solutions and weekend appointments can reduce some of the delays, that should not take away from the need to progress systematic improvements in how we approach autism and those who are waiting for an assessment. The debate is whether a strategy or legislation is best suited to making those improvements. It is deeply worrying that parents and families have felt it necessary to pay for private provision in order to receive a diagnosis. That creates further inequalities, particularly given, as I mentioned, the higher prevalence of autism in deprived areas. As the Committee Chair mentioned at the start, the guiding principle of the NHS, which is its being free at the point of need, must be restored for our autistic population. Members right across the House can agree on that.

We need to seriously question whether the interim strategy is fit for purpose to deliver the necessary results, given the new and unprecedented challenges presented by the pandemic. Changes cannot wait until the next scheduled evaluation. The Minister needs to follow through on his pledge that every child, diagnosed or undiagnosed, receives equitable access to the practical support that they desperately need, and he outlined that. We urge the Minister to bring forward legislative proposals to enhance current statutory provision. Those should include establishing a cross-departmental independent scrutiny mechanism, developing and funding a cross-departmental NI autism training strategy, providing training, providing an early intervention service, providing an autism information service and helpline and meeting the needs that adults with autism and autistic adults have in terms of lifelong learning, employment support, recreation, emotional and mental well-being and supported living.

As time is eluding me, I thank Members for their contributions and urge them to support the amendment.

**Ms Brogan:** First, I thank my colleague Colm Gildernew for proposing the motion and Pam Cameron for her amendment, which I will support. I also thank all Members

for their contributions. I am glad to say that there has been widespread support for the motion.

I declare an interest in the topic. A family very close to me is going through this process, and I can see at first-hand their frustration and exhaustion and the fact that they are having to fight so hard just to get a diagnosis. It is worth remembering that a diagnosis is just the beginning of the process for a child or adult with autism and that they will need support services after that. It is really disheartening and frustrating for families to face all those hurdles at the very beginning of the process, so I am really glad that we are having the debate.

In winding on the motion, I will not summarise each individual's remarks, but I will touch on some of the main points that have been highlighted. The main one is the lack of access to diagnostic services for children and adults with autism. As we said, it is just not good enough. We heard about the waiting times, with some of them being up to three years. That is not good enough. The current system is letting down our children and adults with autism and their families. It is simply unacceptable that some families are paying up to £1,400 for an assessment for autism. That is unfair, and it creates a two-tier health service and further disparities.

Most Members mentioned that we need a cross-departmental focus and approach to an autism strategy to tackle those issues. I completely agree with that.

In my capacity as a member of the Education Committee and as Sinn Féin spokesperson on children and young people, I will focus my remaining remarks on the educational needs of children and young people, particularly those with autism.

According to the Department of Health's monitoring report of May 2020, one in 24 children in the North receives a diagnosis of autism. Their journey through education and how they are supported on that journey are crucial to ensuring that those children have access to the same opportunities as their peers. Statistics suggest that 25% of those presenting with a diagnosis of autism will have an accompanying learning disability.

The challenges that those children face must be met with an ambitious strategy that incorporates their health, social and educational needs. Our education system is only one piece of the puzzle in supporting children with autism. In the absence of a timely diagnosis, it cannot support or deliver for those children. MLAs across the Chamber said that they had heard from distressed families who are at their wits' end after waiting for up to three years for an autism diagnosis.

Alongside my colleague Maoliosa McHugh, I have spoken to a range of families in my constituency of West Tyrone. They have been left frustrated, angry, upset and exhausted. They have, ultimately, given up hope because they have waited so long for an assessment.

As of April 2021, the Western Trust had 1,099 children waiting for appointments, with the longest wait being 720 days, yet families in the Southern Trust wait less than the recommended maximum of 13 weeks. As has been asked today, why is there such disparity between trust areas? Why should one family wait up to two years, sometimes three, for an assessment simply because of where they live? It is unfair. It is unfair on parents and families who

want the best for their child and on the child who deserves to have their needs met.

When it comes to supporting and developing our children, we hear time and time again that early intervention is critical. The system fails countless children with autism and their families from the outset. We need to fix that. We need to ensure that early intervention is embedded in the health and social care system and the education system.

Key to the success of any strategy for supporting people with a diagnosis of autism is accountability. The Public Accounts Committee recently published a report on the Audit Office's 'Impact Review of Special Educational Needs' in the North. One of its conclusions was startling. It concluded that despite the vast sums — up to £1.3 billion over five years — spent, neither the Education Authority nor the Department of Education could demonstrate value for money in that expenditure.

Agencies and Departments cannot simply throw money at special educational needs. Our children deserve strong, accountable leadership that offers a strategic vision of how they will be supported in their education journeys. While Health may take the lead on delivering the strategy, it must be done in collaboration and partnership with Education and others.

The meaningful involvement of children with autism, their families, carers and others in developing policy and services is critical. From an education perspective, some pressing issues could be resolved in the interim, which would have a positive impact on the school experience of children with autism and their families. The Education Committee recently heard shocking testimony about the use of restraint and seclusion in schools. The lack of statutory guidance on the monitoring and recording of such incidents in schools was even more worrying.

I am very pleased that the Department of Education published interim guidance yesterday on the use of restraint and seclusion and on how incidents are monitored and recorded. I thank the parents and advocates who worked tirelessly and campaigned relentlessly to ensure that the guidance was updated. I know that their work is not done, but I take the opportunity to say "Well done".

Last year, the Assembly supported a motion on mandatory autism and special educational needs training for school staff. That was touched upon throughout the debate. Some weeks ago, the Education Committee received a briefing from Autism NI, which also supports calls for mandatory autism training in schools. Our teachers and school staff want to be equipped with the necessary skills to support children with autism. The Education Minister should update us on his plans to act in accordance with that motion.

I am sure that many Members have heard accounts from teachers who struggle to manage classrooms without additional resources or appropriate training. In supporting people with autism, we must support them from the earliest possible moment. That is why Education as well as Health must take a prominent role in the development of a longer-term strategy in this area.

### 12.30 pm

*Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

### *Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes with deep concern that, by the end of 2020, almost 4,500 children across health and social care trusts were awaiting a diagnostic assessment for autism, with some reportedly waiting more than two years, which exceeds the autism assessment standard of 13 weeks from the point of the initial referral; recognises the distress and harm that this places on those awaiting diagnosis and tailored support services, as well as on their families; expresses its concern at the growing inequality of access to autism services and diagnosis; further notes the stark difference in waiting times across health and social care trusts; and calls on the Minister of Health to bring forward a longer-term strategy that sets out measurable targets against which its successes may be assessed by an independent body, to be progressed urgently in partnership with those with autism, their families, carers and community and voluntary sector organisations, to ensure equality of care and services that are free at the point of access and based on need.*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments to allow the relevant Minister and Members to get into the Chamber for the next debate.



## Strategies to Protect Peatlands and Woodlands

**Mr McGrath:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly pays tribute to the heroic efforts by those emergency service personnel from across these islands and the local community who responded to the recent wildfires in the Mournes; notes the importance of preserving the natural environment for improving air quality, biodiversity, carbon capture and combating the climate emergency; further notes the importance of both rewilding and protecting peatlands in tackling the climate emergency; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to produce fully resourced strategies and implementation plans to protect, preserve and enhance our peatlands and woodlands without further delay.*

**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.

**Mr McGrath:** I am delighted to propose today's motion. As an MLA for the constituency of South Down, I know only too well the importance of protecting our peatlands and woodlands and the dangers of wildfires. Those elements must form part of our response to the ongoing climate emergency. Daily, in my constituency, we stand in awe of the Mountains of Mourne. That mountain range is rich in biodiversity, flora and fauna. Every year, countless people make their way from all parts of the world to visit the mountains to enjoy the stunning vistas that they provide and to explore the untamed expanse. That natural wonder has inspired much art and literature. Today, visitors to the area help drive the local economy. The Mournes are an essential part of the North's tourism product, so it is essential that the peatlands and woodlands there be protected, enhanced, where possible, and preserved for future generations to enjoy.

The island of Ireland was once renowned for its beautiful, plentiful peatlands, although it must be said that such connection with the earth rather shamefully formed part of generations of anti-Irish stereotyping and prejudice. That connection with the land was essential, however. That type of wetland can store more carbon than similarly sized patches of forest when left intact. Ireland's raised bogs have dwindled to just 1% of the area that they used to cover. Peat was once used as a means of heat, but it is estimated that such sources in the South will be depleted entirely by 2028. Re-wetting of the peatlands is needed, just as rewilding of our landscape is. We recognise that attempts to rewild such areas can, at times, prove unpopular. Given that 72% of land in the South and 75% of land in the North is farmland, the tension between economic stability and environmental diversity and protection is evident.

In my constituency, we are fortunate to have a local charity, True Harvest Seeds, that is right at the front of protecting, enhancing and preserving flora that is native to the island of Ireland. That is such a noble endeavour and one that I fully support. If we again look to the South, we see that, along the west coast of Ireland, there exists a scheme whereby public funding is given to farmers

who will then manage conservation projects, such as wildlife habitat restoration, on their own land. It is not rocket science. It takes some inspired thinking, but it is not beyond the realms of possibility. Rewilding our landscape is possible.

The recent wildfire in my constituency has brought back into public focus the need to address the issue of wildfires once and for all, given how they impede not just rewilding but already wild landscapes. While it is disheartening that it has taken that recent fire to revive interest in the matter, I am glad that we are now finally able to have the debate. What has taken us so long? Back in 2016, when he was Minister of the Environment, my colleague Mark Durkan not only raised £1.25 million from the carrier bag levy but was able to provide £125,000 to boost natural environment initiatives, which included an initiative on how we address wildfires. The following year, in 2017, through DAERA, an international seminar, the first of its kind to be held on the island of Ireland, was hosted in Newry so that we could better understand wildfires in order to prevent them in the future. What was the ministerial response? What was the follow-up from the announcement? Much like every other failed opportunity in that period, there was no response, because the institutions had been felled and ministerial responsibility had been abandoned. Inaction and missed opportunity went hand in hand. Think of what we could have achieved following that pioneering international seminar had the two parties that led the Government not abdicated their responsibility and had instead worked in the best interests of public health, public safety and, indeed, the public purse.

The facts are undeniable. Major wildfires used to happen once every four years, but they now take place every year and, sometimes, numerous times throughout the year. As our dry seasons become drier and longer, we could soon witness wildfires on the island of Ireland on the scale of those recently seen in Australia. What we see with such fires is that, even when the fire has been extinguished, enough heat has been transferred underground, where it remains, and the chance of future fires only increases. That has a direct impact on any chance of survival for our flora and fauna. Something needs to change. We cannot keep sending our emergency services in to deal with wildfires, endangering their lives and reacting to landscape that is becoming even more scarred and barren.

I put on record my total support and thanks to the firefighters from Newcastle and beyond who fought the recent fires. It was exceptionally physical and gruelling work — often literally a hand-to-hand fight between the firefighters and the fire. Yet they carried it out and preserved as much of the landscape up there as they could. We are indebted to them for what they did.

It is possible to deliver on the green agenda when political leaders show leadership. Mark Durkan did it in 2016, and Minister Mallon has been doing it consistently since she took over Infrastructure, so perhaps the two leading parties of government, although late to the party, will live up to their ministerial responsibilities. We need to identify and resource better methods of land management than just burning, although I will not go as far as the MP for South Down and refer to such land managers — his voters — as environmental arsonists. Leadership is required not just in our actions but in our words. We must take action now

to prevent wildfires and to encourage ecological recovery from these events.

Rewilding the land is not a throwback to the old stereotypes of Ireland and her people; rather, it is a vision for the future, one in which we celebrate our rich and vibrant biodiversity and recognise that we share this island not only with one another but with a range of biodiversity. That is why, today, the SDLP calls on the Environment Minister to introduce resourced strategies to protect our woodlands and peatlands from destruction. Such strategies should include the additional regulation of sensitive areas so that re-wetting and cutting are the methods of choice for land managers.

There can be no more inaction and no more missed opportunities. Quite simply, we must act now. That is why I am happy to propose the motion and commend it to the House.

**Mr Irwin:** The motion has been brought into sharp focus following the deliberately started blazes on the Mourne Mountains, which is an area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) and one of Northern Ireland's most prized tourist attractions. I am sure that I speak for everyone in the House when I say that we were horrified at the scenes of the mountainside in flames. There has been much concern from the public about the damage and the long recovery period for that important ecosystem. I urge a redoubling of efforts by everyone who wishes to visit the Mournes and similar habitats to understand the dangers posed by simple acts such as dropping a cigarette butt or lighting a campfire or barbecue close to vegetation that is dry and has the potential to ignite.

It is important that public bodies increase publicity and awareness of the dangers. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the emergency services and the local community in the Mournes area, who played a significant role in dealing with a rapidly evolving situation. I, again, thank the emergency services for their sterling work in extinguishing the fire and preventing even further widespread damage to the Mourne Mountains.

There is much value, merit and benefit to the climate and to people generally from the preservation and nurturing of those natural resources, and I fully agree about the need for them to be protected. According to the soil map, 24.6% of Northern Ireland is covered in peat: about 242,622 hectares. Woodland and forest cover stands at about 8% of land, which, when compared with the UK at 13% and the Republic of Ireland at 11%, shows that we have some way to go in Northern Ireland to match that resource. Our current woodland resource is in the region of 113,000 hectares, and the Minister has launched the Forests for our Future initiative, which seeks to see 18 million trees planted here over the next 10 years.

Minister Poots has started on the front foot in that regard. Indeed, his climate change Bill is in process and contains many important requirements and initiatives to assist the Province in protecting the environment and the contribution of Northern Ireland to reducing overall global emissions, to which Northern Ireland currently contributes 0.04%. I urge every party and Member to get behind the work of the Minister.

## 12.45 pm

As we know, woodlands and peatlands are very useful carbon sinks and natural storage facilities. It is vital that they are protected and, indeed, enhanced in order to continue to provide that very important function. The issue is that, if they are not looked after and tended to correctly, they lose that important value as a carbon store and actually become part of the problem. That must be avoided and reversed.

On 2 March, during Minister Poots's statement to the House, I asked him about the specific issue of utilising government- and council-owned land for tree-planting. He agreed that that represented a sensible way forward. That option is important as it removes a significant cost from the initiative. As many public bodies and agencies, such as Northern Ireland Water, have vast swathes of land, it could be ideally suited to that purpose. I understand that those realistic options will be pursued by the Minister; he has already commenced work in that regard.

To that end, there is much work ongoing in regards to the basis of the motion that is before the House today. I look forward to seeing more progress on that important work in the weeks ahead, especially around the publication of a peatland strategy. I said in the House yesterday that we must be mindful of the impacts of any strategy around climate change. When it comes to this motion and the issue of rewilding, we must ensure that, ultimately, it provides the response that is required to address the concerns around climate change and that those who farm the land and are custodians of it are not left disadvantaged. That will be avoided through well-thought-out, sensible proposals. I support the motion.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** There was some interference with the microphones, but it is OK now.

**Mr McAleer:** I welcome today's motion. Like everybody else in the Chamber, I want to be identified with paying tribute to our emergency service personnel across all of Ireland who were involved in tackling the wildfires that ravaged the Mournes and the Killarney National Park. I also pay tribute to the local community that assisted in that very gallant effort. More than 100 firefighters were involved in the operation in the Mournes; it took three days to bring the fire under control. We see how those fires spread. They cause untold damage to our environment and wildlife, and they are a substantial risk to life and property. In addition, as has been pointed out, the wildfires pose a risk to our drinking water.

The wildfires in the Mournes were declared a major incident by our fire service. I am told that the scale of the devastation extends to more than 3.5 kilometres. We are aware that that fire may have been started deliberately, which is very frustrating and angering. The National Trust says that it will take years for the landscape to recover. Unfortunately, I have some experience of that in my own part of the world, in west Tyrone: in the Murrins area of special scientific interest (ASSI), there was a fire last year that devastated 150 hectares. I know from first-hand experience about the very serious ecological and human impact that that has on local communities, biodiversity and natural habitats.

Wildfires have a devastating impact on so many levels. From the environmental perspective, although the green shoots of recovery happen very quickly, the richness of

the biodiversity and habitats takes years to recover, if it ever does. In the Murrins ASSI, which was impacted by the blaze last year, we have bog mosses, cotton grass, bogbean, tall heather, cross-leaved heath, tall bog-sedge, crowberry and much more. We have a rich biodiversity. Of course, for wildlife, that becomes a habitat. Although the green shoots have come back, the richness of the biodiversity is simply not there. It will take years to restore.

The economic impact is huge as well. There are many landowners in my part of the world, and, I am sure, everywhere, who have had their land and their fencing and posts destroyed.

A neighbour of mine who is a farmer lost 3 kilometres of fencing as well as gateposts, fixtures and fittings; indeed, had it not been for the Fire Service, the local community and local farmers who used their slurry tanks for water to help to contain the blaze, that farmer would have lost their house as well. It is frustrating. The people who are impacted find that getting compensation is difficult because there is a huge onus on them to provide proof that it was done by a proscribed organisation or by a group of three or more individuals. That comes at a huge cost. To be fair, the Department is good at getting its force majeure applications in, so at least they are not out for that loss, but it is frustrating for them to have to carry the burden of the cost of that fencing and the cost of the associated fixtures and fittings. I raised that with the Minister last year and, again, the force majeure did happen.

I commend the idea of a peatlands strategy. However, when it comes to a strategy, in responding to such wildfires it is hugely important that the local community works in partnership with the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS); indeed, just a couple of years ago, I hosted a seminar in Gortin with the Fire and Rescue Service and local farmers, which was headed up by the Fire Service's lead wildfire officer, to discuss a partnership model. Local communities and farmers will know back roads and bóithrins and, maybe, the ways to the source of a blaze that the Fire Service might not be able to get to. They can play a part in the peripheral aspects of such fires. In my case, when the fire happened down our way last year, the community association was able to divert traffic on local roads to prevent people coming to look at the fire, which was blocking the roads for the Fire Service. It is important that any strategy also has that aspect of involving the local community centrally in partnership with the Fire Service in helping to deal with those matters.

To conclude, as we approach the summer season, I make the call that people need to think seriously about the potential implications of their actions in starting those fires, either by accident or deliberately. The potential risks to life and property, farm businesses, natural habitats and the environment are absolutely huge.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute to the debate, which I welcome. I also thank the proposer of the motion.

Watching the wildfires spreading across the Mournes just over two weeks ago was a heartbreaking sight for us all. At the outset, I record my and my party's thanks to everyone who assisted with controlling and fighting the fires, including Fire Service personnel, DAERA staff from the Forest Service and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the PSNI, the UK Maritime and Coastguard

Agency, the Irish Coast Guard and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, along with the local residents, community activists and businesses. It was extremely dangerous for the people involved in tackling the fire, and it was particularly devastating for the environmental conservation of an area that is significantly rich in its quality and diversity of habitats and is populated with plant and animal species that are extremely rare, scarce and limited. We really must look at the protection and preservation of such areas.

Of course, we must do more. Some of my experiences have been that some of our agencies have acted more as enforcers against farmers and landowners, while they could achieve more, perhaps, by acting as advisers. I am most certainly not saying that that should be a reason or an excuse for such destruction — definitely not — but it is unfair to designate land and farm areas with specific protection legislation without having an appropriate discussion with the farmers and the landowners.

While more and better advice to farmers and landowners is important, an education process and, at times, an improved enforcement mechanism is required for the wider public and the users of such locations. We are blessed in Northern Ireland to have many renowned locations that are rich in their environmental quality, and many of those areas are known throughout the world. It is therefore vital that those who use such locations do so with responsible behaviour. We want the public to enjoy the beauty and experience of our natural habitats in this beautiful countryside. Yes, by all means, enjoy it, but please do not destroy it. Many of those areas have served our community and society for generations, and many are improving in their quality, but, when a fire such as the one in the Mournes happens, it destroys years and decades of natural habitat and growth and the development of important species.

A combination of management, protection, advice, education and enforcement is required. All have their place in developing a way forward, but they must be directed at the proper methods in an overall strategy. We must work collectively with all the agencies, landowners, local people and the public to ensure the protection of such important areas for our community.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** As it is now 12.56 pm and the Business Committee is due to meet at 1.00 pm, I propose to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next item will be questions to the Minister of Education. When we return to this debate, the first Member to speak will be Mr John Blair. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.56 pm.*

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

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Education

#### Education Transformation Programme: Closure

1. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education why he has closed the education transformation programme. (AQO 2018/17-22)

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** I thank the Member for her question. The transformation programme was an innovative approach to policy and operational review developed by departmental officials in April 2018. It was established in anticipation of the return of the Assembly and for discussion with an incoming Minister. Work across a number of areas was progressed to good effect until the point at which I had to divert departmental staff resources to deal with the significant work associated with the pandemic. Following advice from officials, I took the decision to formally close the programme in March 2021 on the basis that there is no guaranteed funding stream for 2021-22 or beyond.

I would like to make it clear that this in no way means an end to transformation activity in the Department. The formal closure of the programme means only that further elements of transformation will be delivered using a different approach. I am keen that policy reform and service delivery improvements continue to be made wherever there is clear and evident need. Some aspects of the transformation programme have already been delivered, and others are continuing as planned, such as the work on an approach to a 14-19 education and training strategy. Other ongoing transformative work includes the scoping of proposals to provide flexibility for school starting age; work to address teacher concerns about workloads and accountability; and a programme of improvement in the Education Authority (EA) relating to services for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN).

Finally, the work of the panel on underachievement and the forthcoming independent review of education are further opportunities to transform our system and improve outcomes for children and young people. I repeat that the closure of the programme does not mean the end of transformation; rather, it will be delivered in a different manner.

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you, Minister. Given the increasing pressures that schools face because of their budgets, can you outline to us whether the common funding formula, which is a key part of that, has ceased? If not, where is it being dealt with, and where can we access updated information on that?

**Mr Weir:** I take the Member's point about the common funding formula. A summary of proposals on that is being prepared by officials. The problem that we tend to see with the common funding formula is that, unless

there is a commitment from the Executive or others to provide additional funding, there is a fight over whether we are taking money out of one school and putting it into another. Ideally, there should be greater funding across the board. The detail of that is being drawn together by officials. Some schools — for example, those operating on split sites — will have concerns about whether there is adequate funding. I visited one of those schools yesterday. It is about assessing what information has been gathered not only for the short term but for the wider review of education as a whole. The review may well have comments to make directly on how we apply funding to make sure that we get the best possible results from any investment.

**Ms Ennis:** Like Kellie Armstrong, I want to ask about the common funding scheme. This is important work, particularly in the context of the recent Audit Office report on how special educational expenditure targets disadvantage. When does the Minister expect the review to conclude, and when does he expect to present the final report on the common funding scheme?

**Mr Weir:** There will be elements to do with what resources are applied. There are a number of strands to this, and you mentioned SEN in particular. Of course, the ongoing review of the EA is part of that, and that is looking at where SEN funding is applied. I anticipate that the final report of the educational panel on underachievement will be available by roughly the end of this month. The report will, I think, look at funding issues, along with other aspects. Again, we want to make sure that there is the best possible delivery of that. The problem is that, in any form of reassessment of where common funding should go, everybody assumes that their school or sector is hard done by and will benefit from it.

The issue is that, unless additional resources are provided for schools as a whole, it will be a question of gains for some and losses for others. There may be an equitable basis on which that can be justified, but we want to avoid a situation of schools fighting among themselves as to whether they have been treated equitably.

**Miss Woods:** The Minister outlines a number of transformative actions that the Department has undertaken, and he mentions funding. A recent Audit Office report found that the Education Department:

*"is unable to demonstrate the effectiveness of its two main funding interventions, accounting for almost £102 million per annum ... to address the educational attainment of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds".*

In light of that, why has the Department failed to introduce adequate arrangements to assess the effectiveness of the interventions and whether they contribute to achieving the required outcomes?

**Mr Weir:** There is obviously a link between social deprivation and educational underachievement, and that topic will be covered by the panel report. I will present that report to the Assembly, in accordance with procedure, but it has to be adopted first by the Executive.

It is sometimes difficult to ascribe a direct linear assessment of particular interventions to individual factors. However, targeting social need by, for example, the use of extended schools has played a significant

role in helping to support socially deprived pupils. It is sometimes difficult to assess the extent of hypothecation. We will look to the recommendations of the expert panel on educational underachievement. We need to balance what is appropriate to ensure that money is spent properly and does not put too much of an additional administrative burden on the schools themselves. It is about trying to find an appropriate balance between the two.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I should have advised Members earlier that question 8 has been withdrawn.

## Strule Shared Education Campus: Progress

**2. Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made on the development of the Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh. (AQO 2019/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for his question. The Department continues to work closely with the six school principals and their teams to build on the culture of sharing in Omagh, albeit within a challenging environment as schools continue to recover from and adapt to ongoing disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The previous procurement competition for the final phase of construction, which was to build five post-primary schools and shared facilities, has been formally closed, and the Department is working to progress the campus to the next stage in the procurement process with a revised strategy. Campus construction is planned to complete in 2025.

The Strule site has been cleared and constructed to formation level in preparation for moving to the next stage of construction. Liaison is ongoing with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council on the Department's planning application for the proposed development works on Gortin Road and Mountjoy Road.

Work is ongoing to reconfirm the previously agreed memorandum of agreement with the Education Authority and trustee bodies of the schools moving to the Strule campus. The document sets out the proposed arrangements for the occupation, governance and management of the campus, particularly the shared facilities and delivery of the educational benefits.

Given the scale of the investment, the educational benefits are vital to the success of the campus. A long-term benefits realisation plan has been agreed with the schools. A project plan and business case detailing the work required to realise the educational benefits and to pilot various shared education initiatives prior to the "go live" is under development by the Education Authority, which is managing the development of the educational model for the campus.

The vacated sites working group is considering how best to plan for and manage the future use and/or disposal of the existing sites following relocation to the campus, and it will contribute to Fermanagh and Omagh District Council's local government development plan and the Omagh opportunity sites task force.

**Mr T Buchanan:** Thank you, Minister, for the update. As the Minister knows, this has been an ongoing issue for some time, and we are keen for it to be brought forward, perhaps at a quicker pace, and to get the diggers on-site in order that the project is brought to completion.

The Minister mentioned vacated sites. Will he indicate what discussions have been going on or outline any plans for those vacated school sites when the campus is completed?

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for his question and comments. We are all keen and the Executive as a whole share that keenness to see action taken on the site. We are talking about a large amount of public money, and that, by its nature, means that things are maybe not moving as quickly as they should.

The Members asked about the vacated sites. As he is aware, as well as Arvalee special school, five post-primary schools are relocating to the campus. Two of the sites are owned by the Education Authority, while three are owned by trustee organisations. Ultimately, it is for the owners of the sites to decide on their disposal. In recognition of the significance of the vacated school sites to Omagh town, the Department established a vacated sites working group in November 2016. The working group comprises members representing the site owners and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, as well as representation from relevant Departments. The working group is actively considering how best to plan for and manage the future use or disposal of the existing school sites. Site-specific disposal strategies have been prepared as a first step in determining plans for the sites' future use. Those plans will always be developed in line with and feed into the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council local development plan and the Omagh opportunity sites task force. There is a strong level of local awareness and a need for local buy-in as we move forward with the vacated sites.

**Ms Brogan:** I thank the Minister for his answer and the update on the Strule Shared Education Campus. I take the opportunity once again to press the Minister to ensure that the project is moved forward at a quick pace. Have there been any delays to the construction of the campus because of COVID? If so, will those delays have an impact on the budget for delivering the project?

**Mr Weir:** There has been some level of impact on the budget, probably caused by the general length of time put in place as a result of this. That has largely come from the issues on the procurement side. COVID itself has not created much direct disruption. On the basis of the current position, completion is still scheduled for 2025.

The potential issue still to be got across is the successful appointment of a main works contractor. While COVID created a level of disruption for smaller projects, particularly if we go back about a year to when people were completely off-site, the construction industry has worked well and developed things well on a range of school sites and has effectively made up time. The situation that we were in with work meant that the project has not been particularly disrupted by COVID.

**Mrs Barton:** I am delighted that there do not seem to be any more hiccups and that the expected completion date is 2025. Can you give an update on the expenditure so far for the Strule campus and the figure for completion?

**Mr Weir:** About £45 million has been spent so far on the Strule campus. That investment delivered the design, construction and fit-out of Arvalee School and Resource Centre, the Strathroy Link Road to improve traffic flow to and from the campus and the completed sites preparation work. Given the scale of the works, that was a

considerable job. It has also delivered the designs for the core schools and the shared facilities.

It is estimated that a further £181 million of costs will be required, including construction costs and a contingency for construction price inflation. That may or may not be necessary, but it is better to overbudget slightly for it. It also includes risk and optimism bias, a staffing programme and other running costs. Her Majesty's Treasury has confirmed the flexibility of Fresh Start Agreement capital funding for the programme, enabling access until the projected programme end date in 2025.

2.15 pm

### SEN Assessment Appeals Process

3. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to review the initial special educational needs (SEN) assessment appeals process in schools. (AQO 2020/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for her question. There are no plans to formally review the initial stages of the SEN assessment processes. If parents are unhappy with a school's internal processes regarding SEN, an option open to them is to contact the dispute avoidance and resolution service (DARS). DARS is an independent confidential service that provides an opportunity for parents to discuss areas of disagreement with schools and/or the Education Authority regarding SEN provision for their child. That service has been delivered by Global Mediation since September 2019. The aim is for parties to resolve differences about non-appealable matters informally, thus removing the need for a parent to go to the special educational needs and disability tribunal (SENDIST).

**Ms McLaughlin:** I thank the Minister for his answer. We have heard from the Children's Law Centre that 97% of special educational needs appeals have been successful, which has led to claims that there is disability discrimination in the system. That is a serious issue. What action is the Minister taking to resolve that matter? Many children with genuine need are routinely rejected by the assessment process.

**Mr Weir:** In many ways, the success of the appeals process shows that it works. We are doing a couple of things. There is a quinquennial review of the EA going on, particularly in note of the issues raised in the recent audit report, which the Department has agreed to progress. As part of the review, we will look at how the EA deals with special educational needs. With regard to early identification, money has been allocated to implement, from September onwards, the SEN legislation that passed through the House a while ago. The consultation on that has been completed. It will deal with the implementation and the code of practice. Within that framework there should be earlier and, therefore, better identification of children with SEN. That will be an important step in working through the process as we move ahead. More than £20 million has been ring-fenced in the budget this year to make sure that the legislation is implemented and delivered, despite the fact that, overall, it has been relatively close to a flatline budget. We have had to find resources from within the Department to fund it.

**Mr Lyttle:** How seriously is the Education Minister taking the Children's Law Centre assertion that the failings in

our special educational needs system in Northern Ireland amount to institutional discrimination against children with disabilities? What responsibility does he take for that? What actions are being taken to address it?

**Mr Weir:** Language can be thrown about that I do not accept, and I do not accept "institutional discrimination" because it attributes a certain level of motivation to those who are directly involved. There is a review of the EA that focuses particularly on SEN delivery. Action is also being taken on the implementation of the process for dealing with special needs. We believe that that will lead to a step change in what can be provided. Ongoing work is also being done with the EA directly to ensure that there are reductions in the statutory assessment process so that they are delivered in time. The issue is being talked about and worked on very seriously. I am loath to see labels being used, because it is unfair to those who have been involved in trying to deliver for special educational needs.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for the work that he has endeavoured to carry out in relation to the needs of children with special needs. There has been success by way of a reduction in delays. What actions have been taken to ensure that the assessment process has improved so that the ultimate outcome is child-centred and parent-led?

**Mr Weir:** The improvement plan put in place by the EA has delivered a number of key improvements in reducing the number of children waiting longer than 26 weeks for completion of the statutory assessment and, importantly, targeting children who have been waiting longest. As indicated, the new SEN framework will, amongst other things, aim to reduce the timescales associated with the statutory process and improve cooperation between the EA and the health trusts. It is important to note that, while what should be achieved is being achieved, the EA reports that the number of children waiting over the statutory target of 26 weeks, as of 31 March this year, has been reduced to zero. It is important that that is maintained and that no child is waiting longer than the statutory target time.

### Irish-medium Education: South Down

4. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to support, including investment in, Irish-medium education in South Down. (AQO 2021/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** In line with my Department's statutory duties, a range of bespoke and sector-specific investment is provided to support the development of Irish-medium education. This includes annual funding to Comhairle Na Gaelscolaíochta, specific support to Irish-medium units, funding to the Education Authority and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, and early years funding to Altram, which has developed a range of preschool resources aimed at helping immersion learning.

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.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I set up a 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 concerns around the loss of language learning due to the pandemic and the shortage of substitute teachers. My officials continue to work with the relevant partner bodies to seek opportunities to mitigate and resolve such concerns.

With regard to investment in South Down specifically, two additional classrooms were provided at Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche in December 2019, and a minor works scheme is under way to improve access control and reduce standing water in the play area at Gaelscoil na mBeann.

**Ms Ennis:** I thank the Minister for his response. Obviously, there is support and investment in Irish-medium education in South Down, but Bunscoil an Lúir in Newry also caters for children from South Down and is an immediate and direct responsibility of the Department of Education. In that context, Minister, will you give a commitment to visit Gaelscoil na mBeann again, and also Bunscoil an Lúir, to see the excellent work and education that is being provided and to see what investment — capital or otherwise — those schools need to keep that high educational standard going?

**Mr Weir:** I am happy to receive invitations from schools and, where possible, I have accommodated those. I would be more than happy to visit those schools if the Member or the school were to put a formal request to the Department. I have visited a number of Irish-medium schools, particularly with the Member's colleague Karen Mullan in the north-west. I am happy to visit those schools to see, at first hand, what the issues are.

**Mr McNulty:** Minister, I applaud your attempt to pronounce as Gaelige words. Well done on that. To follow up on the Bunscoil an Lúir question, at what stage are its new-build plans?

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for his compliments on my linguistic skills. Bunscoil an Lúir — at this point, I have probably blown whatever credibility I had — applied to the school enhancement programme, and, at that stage, it was not ranked high enough. There are no direct plans, at present, for a redevelopment of the school. However, the Department has undertaken to do a further site search on behalf of the school to look at its long-term planning and potential future. It is not just about where we will be in two or three years, it is about the longer position. Until it is approved for a scheme, no capital will be allocated to the redevelopment of the school but, where required, minor works will continue to be undertaken at the existing site.

### Seaview Primary School and Nursery Unit

5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made on new school premises for Seaview Primary School and Nursery Unit, Belfast. (AQO 2022/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The business case for the major works project at Seaview Primary School is still in preparation. It will examine a number of options for the location of the school, including the option of a rebuild on the existing site. It is expected that the business case will be completed in late summer of this year. Until the business case has been finalised, we cannot determine the preferred option for the major capital project, but that decision should follow the completion of the business case in the summer.

**Mr Humphrey:** I am disappointed to hear from the Minister that the business case has not yet been finalised. I fully understand the need for a special needs school in north Belfast, and I very much support that. I am disappointed that the former Castle High School site has been chosen as a temporary site for the new school. Given that the Minister visited the school last year, he is aware of the interest that the governors, the principal and I have in the school potentially relocating there.

Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the business case is completed by the end of the summer? That school has waited for some eight years. Will he also commit to meeting the principal and the governors again, with me, to give that reassurance? There is considerable annoyance among —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Will the Member finish his question?

**Mr Humphrey:** — the professional teachers and the governors.

**Mr Weir:** I understand that. I will do all that I can to ensure that the business case is completed within that timescale. I am also happy to meet the governors and the principal of the school.

Although the Fortwilliam site will be used as a temporary site for the special needs school from September, I do not believe that that is a viable long-term solution. That site, which may be one of the most likely site options for Seaview Primary, should not be knocked out of the picture because of the temporary arrangements for the special needs situation. We also need longer-term plans for the broader provision of special needs education within Belfast. The situation with Fortwilliam is very much a temporary fix and should not in any way prejudice the options for Seaview.

**Dr Aiken:** I have a declaration of interest: I am a member of the board of governors of the excellent Kilbride Central Primary School up in my constituency. One issue that we, as a board of governors, have had — we have probably alluded to this — is that much of the work that we do seems to be repeated, even though we already have plans and future plans for what we plan to do. Can the Minister commit to getting the Education Authority and the various other organisations to rationalise what they are trying to do, rather than wasting government money by requiring second and third sets of plans?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** That is beyond the scope of the original question. The Minister may choose whether to answer.

**Mr Weir:** I would certainly encourage them not to waste government money. That would cause a demarcation dispute, because that is generally my role. In all seriousness, we will work on that particular case, and I will get any further information directly to the Member.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Philip McGuigan is not in his place. John Blair is not in his place.

### Schools: COVID-19 Counselling Services

9. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Education, given the impact COVID-19 has had on young people, to outline what additional support he will provide to schools to resource counselling services. (AQO 2026/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Question 9? We are working our way very heavily through the folder today.

The Education Authority has advised, through the Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS), that post-primary-aged young people from mainstream schools, special schools and education other than at school provision can access school counselling if that is required. Although school staff anticipated an overwhelming increase in demand for the counselling service, that has not been evidenced by the number of referrals that have been received so far. Since young people have returned to on-site learning, the demand for counselling has increased but has not overwhelmed the service. The ICSS providers are managing the pressures by putting additional resources into schools where demand has increased, using some of the allocation for counselling sessions for July and August 2021 to do so.

**Mr Harvey:** Will the Minister advise whether his Department plans to enhance teacher training relating to mental health issues among students?

**Mr Weir:** We give a level of flexibility for teacher training, and we have indicated that we encourage development around special needs and trauma. From that point of view, we are working alongside the Department of Health to ensure that additional support is put in place this year for an emotional health and well-being framework, and that that support continues to be put in place. That should mean that there are greater opportunities for schools to access counselling resources. Also, given the circumstances, while a lot of focus has been on the post-primary sector, there may be a feeling that there have not been enough resources for the primary sector. As part of addressing that, we will have a pilot scheme for primary-school counselling.

2.30 pm

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I am afraid that the time allocated for listed questions is up. We will now move on to topical questions.

Pat Sheehan is not in his place.

## Mental Health Support: School Staff and Students

T3. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Education what conversations he has had and what steps he has taken to ensure that staff and students have good, easily accessible support for their mental health, given that she knows that he and Minister Swann have a key interest in mental health. (AQT 1293/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for at least not playing truant today and for her question. There are two strands to the matter. We are working together on it. Sometimes, staff can maybe be a little bit overlooked. We are applying, at two levels, the emotional health and well-being framework, which is directly baselined and has Education and Health components. To some extent, as we move ahead, that work will be, in many ways, about trialling a range of supports. I do not think that anybody would pretend that everything will be got right from day one, and, to some extent, the trials will show what level of adjustment there needs to be. The importance of the work is that, at present, £6.5 million will be directly mainstreamed into the budget.

Additionally, the aim is to have a COVID recovery fund of about £5 million to directly target emotional health and well-being. There will be a level of a mixed economy in that, because what is provided through the framework will, to a certain extent, be top-down. The money that will be allocated as part of the COVID recovery will be an allocation per head to schools, and a high level of flexibility will be given to schools in how they spend that. We have indicated that, for example, while the focus will quite often be on the pupils, if there are individual actions that a school feels will be beneficial to its staff or, indeed, in helping create a certain environment, flexibility will be given to those on the ground to decide where they believe the most need is.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Minister for his positive answer. I think that schools will welcome that flexibility. I know that you have already taken some steps to tackle cyberbullying, which is a massive issue that we know can have a detrimental impact on young people and their overall well-being. What further steps are you taking to either stop it or to support students and families who are experiencing it?

**Mr Weir:** As the Member will be aware, the anti-bullying legislation will be implemented from 1 September. That was passed some time ago, and we all worked with the trade unions on it. That will have a particular focus on what is directly happening in schools. Part of the problem that we face and that we have faced for a number of years with bullying, trolling and a range of issues goes beyond simply what happens in the purview of the school and in the classroom.

We have been working, and we will continue to work, on a cross-departmental basis on e-safety in particular. It was noticeable that during COVID we were able to roll out and get support for one of the apps that is available. We will work with others to try to make what impact we can. All of us realise the enormity of e-safety and e-bullying, and that means that, at times, finding solutions will be a lot more difficult than finding a silver bullet to end it. We would all like to see it end, but it is about trying to at least restrain it and take steps and make interventions where we can. We will continue to work with Health, Justice and others, because the issue stretches across a range of Departments. There is no doubt that, today, our young people are under greater pressure, particularly because cyberbullying is more common than it has ever been.

## Summer Youth Activity Scheme

T4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Education, following his announcement yesterday of an additional £5 million for summer interventions and youth activity for children in Northern Ireland, to detail what the funding will be used for and how organisations can apply for it. (AQT 1294/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** It is available now. From 5.00 pm yesterday, organisations were able to apply for it. I think that it closes on 21 May. I should make sure that I get the date right. There are a number of strands to it. Part of the programme is Access for All, which will enable, I think, 65 activity camps in Northern Ireland. There is a Summer Jam programme.

The first is open to a range of youth organisations and community groups to apply for. A second strand will provide support for Church and uniformed organisations in particular. A Summer Boost scheme will enable those



working on the ground in youth settings to provide greater outreach support over the summer. It will also facilitate longer opening hours for youth centres. A fourth strand will provide materials.

The impacts of the schemes will cover a wide range of activities from sports to the creative arts. We hope that, as restrictions ease, some of the activities will involve whole families and include interaction with adults. There will be something for everyone, irrespective of where their interests lie. Given the pressures that some of our young people in particular have been under because of the COVID situation, it is critical, as we move ahead, to provide this support over the summer. A lot of our young people have perhaps suffered more than almost any other group in society.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I can hear Mr Humphrey's enthusiasm from the Back Benches. As we all know, he has long since left the Scouts but is still very involved.

The funding is very welcome. Will the Minister indicate how much each of these groups will be able to apply for, or what size the fund is for each group?

**Mr Weir:** In Access to All, which is for non-EA-registered voluntary groups, it can be up to £10,000 or, depending on the number of participants, possibly up to £25,000. For local area-based projects, Summer Jam funding can be anywhere from £6,000 to £60,000, depending on the number of participants. For Summer Boost, it can be up to £15,000 per programme. For the fourth strand, which is the camp equipment grant, individual applications can be for up to £2,500. A wide range of funding is available through the schemes.

### School Enhancement Programme: Funding

T5. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Education when the next round of school enhancement programme (SEP) funding will be available. (AQT 1295/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I intend to review progress. At the moment, 72 projects are advanced in design under the second call to the school enhancement programme. I will consider whether to make a third call for applications as part of the overall capital investment strategy. The SEP has been very successful, so I suspect that, ultimately, another call for SEP funding is a question of when rather than if.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. When the funding becomes available, will the Minister consider prioritising schools such as Limavady High School, in my constituency, which requires facilities to ensure pupil health and fitness?

**Mr Weir:** All politics is local. I know that the Member has taken a strong interest in Limavady High School, and I, along with others, was able to visit it and discuss the matter with the school principal.

There are competing demands for capital investment. When an SEP call is made, it will be on the basis of competition between all schools that apply. The fact that a range of schools currently benefits from the programme should mean that their facilities are advanced enough that, while there will not be a bar on their applying to the SEP again, schools that have not benefited to date will have a better chance because they will have moved

up the ladder. For any school, it is important to engage continuously with the Education Authority so that action can be taken on minor works in the meantime. Having been in Carrickfergus yesterday, I know that the EA is to replace school windows on that campus over the next few months. It is not a case of either/or; all applications will be treated on merit and scored according to the condition of the school and what each school needs.

### Boards of Governors: EA Accountability

T6. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Education what accountability mechanisms the Education Authority (EA) has to ensure that boards of governors, collectively and as individual members, fulfil their stated responsibilities as trustees of public funding. (AQT 1296/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I pay tribute to a lot of the work that has been done by boards of governors. Obviously, yes, they are responsible for training and ultimately accountable to the EA. Indeed, they have to operate within an allocated budget. If there are mechanisms by which we can provide greater support and accountability for boards of governors, we will need to do that. We want to create a situation in which responsibilities are taken seriously, but we do not want to create a scenario in which being a member of a board of governors becomes such an onerous position that nobody wants to take it on.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister outline what powers, if any, the Education Authority has to sanction or remove boards of governors or individual governors who fail to govern in line with the Education Authority's scheme of management?

**Mr Weir:** I do not have the details to hand, but I will write to the Member with those.

### School Assessments: DE/CCEA Monitoring

T7. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education, in this mental health week, to confirm the extent of the monitoring that is being undertaken by the Department of Education and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) on the controlled assessments that are taking place in schools, given the significant negative impact that those are having on students. (AQT 1297/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** With respect to the Member, we have given advice to schools on what assessments should be put in place. Indeed, there is no direct requirement to do that. There is no easy way to gain qualifications that will be recognised not only throughout the UK but worldwide. That has to be done on the basis of robust evidence. There is an absence of direct examinations for 2021. There needs to be an evidence base for the awarding of qualifications. However, we have made it very clear, for instance, that there is no compulsory nature to any controlled assessment. Indeed, the advice that CCEA and I have been given is to limit the level of controlled assessment in schools. However, schools have the power to do that. It is wrong to pretend that there is a very easy solution that simply enables qualifications to be awarded without a clear pathway of evidence to support them.

**Ms Armstrong:** I am disappointed by the Minister's response, because I believe that it is the Department of Education and CCEA's responsibility to monitor the

impacts that this has on children. To speak again about mental health and to pick up on a point made by Miss Woods, it has come to my attention that there is a primary school in my constituency where the board of governors has not met, leading to stress for staff and parents. What action will you take to ensure the effective governance of primary schools and, in particular, to protect staff who are employed by the Education Authority?

**Mr Weir:** I am not aware of that case. If the Member wants to write to me with the details, we will follow that up. It is probably not appropriate to discuss an individual case across the Floor, but we will pursue that.

### Holy Trinity College, Cookstown

T8. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education for an update on progress with the construction at Holy Trinity secondary school, Cookstown. (AQT 1298/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I do not have the detail of Holy Trinity primary —.

**Mr McGlone:** Secondary.

**Mr Weir:** Secondary, sorry. I do not have the details directly to hand. I will get some details to the Member and put those on the record. You will appreciate that, as this is a topical question, I do not have details on the school directly to hand.

**Mr McGlone:** That is grand. I thank the Minister for that. I do not expect him to have all the details in front of him for every potential question.

### School Starting-age Flexibility

T9. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education to state how likely it is that families will have clarity on the issue of a flexible school-starting age before the end of this mandate, given that, last week, the Education Committee was briefed on the Department's plans to introduce such flexibility, with some concern raised that it might not be possible to introduce legislation within this mandate. (AQT 1299/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** We all hope that the mandate runs to its full extent. Given that we must have a consultation on the proposals, it will be challenging. I think that it is achievable, but there is a risk that it will not happen. I am sure that the Committee and everyone in the House will want to make sure that this is put to bed this term. I believe that it is achievable within this mandate. We just have to make sure that we do not take any steps that elongate the process.

2.45 pm

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** That is the end of the time allocated to questions to the Minister of Education. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before we return to the debate on the protection of peatlands and woodlands.

## Private Members' Business

### Strategies to Protect Peatlands and Woodlands

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly pays tribute to the heroic efforts by those emergency service personnel from across these islands and the local community who responded to the recent wildfires in the Mourne; notes the importance of preserving the natural environment for improving air quality, biodiversity, carbon capture and combating the climate emergency; further notes the importance of both rewilding and protecting peatlands in tackling the climate emergency; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to produce fully resourced strategies and implementation plans to protect, preserve and enhance our peatlands and woodlands without further delay. — [Mr McGrath.]*

**Mr Blair:** Before I begin, I apologise to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for not being in my place to ask my question of the Minister of Education. I hope that you and other Members understand that that related to the choreography of getting here and the limited numbers allowed in the Chamber. My sincere apologies.

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will briefly mention the inquest outcome that found the Ballymurphy victims innocent. I pay tribute to their families on the vindication of their campaign, and my thoughts are with them.

The point has been made many times, but I will further emphasise it: we are facing a climate and ecological crisis. Northern Ireland's unique natural environment is under significant threat. I have asked a number of questions on the issue, both questions for written answer and in the Chamber. Last week, I met the Mourne Heritage Trust to discuss the matters that are the subject of the motion. Although we commonly refer to "wildfires", as was said to me during that meeting and has been on other occasions, those fires are not wild. As the Minister said in response to questions on his statement a couple of weeks ago, for the most part such fires are caused by human bad practice, and we should reflect that when we speak on the issues.

Ammonia levels have risen by 22% in Northern Ireland since 2010, compared with an increase of 5% in the rest of the UK. Some 98% of designated special areas of conservation (SACs) are exceeding critical key levels of pollutants. That can seriously impact on protected sites such as peatlands and woodlands. Northern Ireland has about 8% of tree cover, which is thought to be the lowest in Europe, and our forest cover is around 40% lower than the UK average. It is therefore hardly surprising to learn that our land use, land-use change and forestry (LULUCF) sector, unlike that of Great Britain, is a net carbon source rather than a net sink.

Investing in peatland restoration and ambitious afforestation is critical if we are serious about a green recovery. The time to act is now.

We need to seize the many cross-cutting environmental and economic opportunities, such as rewilding and habitat restoration, in order to enable landowners in rural communities to diversify their income in areas where

farming alone is no longer the only viable option. We need ambitious, long-term plans and concrete actions to restore our damaged ecosystems. We need to catch up with the rest of the UK and deliver a comprehensive recovery strategy in tandem with legislative change.

Last year, the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, announced a fund of £640 million to plant more than 40 million trees and restore 35,000 hectares of peatland in England, with the Scottish and Welsh Governments also investing in similar schemes. The Irish Government have approved an allocation of €108 million for a bog rehabilitation plan. In Northern Ireland, we have made a significant start with the green growth strategy and the Forests for our Future, but more is required.

In Northern Ireland, our peatlands are under threat, with pressures such as overgrazing, drainage and burning causing damage to 86% of them. As a result, many of our peatlands are now net emitters of greenhouse gases. It is critical that we develop similar schemes here if we are to restore our natural carbon store.

The Alliance Party's green new deal, launched last month, outlines my party's plans to deliver large-scale biodiversity restoration and a continued urgent need for an independent Northern Ireland environmental protection agency. On behalf of Alliance, I support the motion and thank the Members for bringing it forward. The motion's purpose is to introduce strategies to protect our treasured natural environments, to encourage others to do the same, and to progress these urgent matters for the good of our people and our future. With my Alliance colleagues, I support the motion.

**Mr M Bradley:** I support the motion. It is both a timely and necessary realisation that our peatbogs, wetlands and forests should be a priority for the Executive. The Executive need to pay more attention to the protection and enhancement of our unique environment.

I join other Members in highlighting the bravery and dedication of our emergency services and members of the community who battled the Mourne wildfire. Those involved put their lives at risk to bring that fire under control, and it is right that they are praised and recognised for their efforts.

While we are about to launch a peatlands strategy document, the primary challenge to peatland restoration is economic. We have spent decades draining peatlands, grasslands and wetlands, all at a cost. However, reversing that drainage also comes at a cost. Altering drainage patterns and local hydro-geography can be costly, but that cost must be met, and it is well worth the expense to the Executive.

The loss of species by wildfires like that on the Mourne can take decades to repair. We need a strategy to reintroduce species where necessary and to enhance the recovery of other species that have been displaced. Peatlands provide an important habitat for many species, and restoration efforts will also have important benefits for biodiversity. Despite the economic hurdles, the technical capacity for restoring peatlands already exists and could be brought in very quickly.

Yesterday, someone said — I think that it was Mr McGlone — that we should leave the environment in a better place than we inherited it. I agree. We owe it to our children and

to our children's children to protect our environment. On that note, I conclude by saying that I support the motion.

**Mr McGuigan:** Like others, I pay tribute to the women and men of our fire service who recently battled the wildfire in the Mourne and, indeed, those in Kerry too. My sister-in-law is a firefighter who has been involved in tackling wildfires, both in the glens of Antrim and the Sperrins, so I know from her the dedication and bravery required for that task.

Nobody could have watched the scenes from the recent fire in the Mourne on our TVs, listened to tales of the local community, or heard from environmentalists detailing the devastating impact of the fire and not have been moved. The environmental impact of such a fire is massive. Last year, in my own constituency of North Antrim, there was a similar wildfire — I take on board the terminology of John Blair, but I am not going to change my speech now, and it is in the motion — in Slieveanorra, between Loughill and the glens. Two years before that, there was another fire on the Craigs Road in my constituency, just outside Rasharkin, and in years gone by, the same on the grass side of Knocklayde Mountain in Ballycastle. Those fires are happening much too frequently. The damage and environmental impact that they cause are much too great.

Like others, I support the motion. Who could argue against the importance of preserving and protecting the natural environment? As the motion states, we need to do so in order to positively impact on air quality, biodiversity and carbon capture and, ultimately, help to combat climate change. We need to rewild and protect peatlands. Uplands are an important part of the ecosystem. As it has been pointed out, peatlands are an excellent carbon sink. The South and other regions on these islands have peatland strategies. It is imperative that the Minister publishes a strategy as soon as possible that deals with peatlands and woodlands and is resourced properly to do so.

I have said many times in the Chamber how privileged I am to live in and represent the constituency of North Antrim, easily the most beautiful part of Ireland.

**Mr Storey:** Northern Ireland.

**Mr McGuigan:** I nearly got agreement from my constituency colleague there.

Leaving aside the internationally renowned heritage sites and beauty spots, it is a part of the world that is blessed with some of the most beautiful environmentally rich places, including peatlands and woodlands. Forests and woodlands play a key environmental role, but they also act as key locations for tourism and recreation. In 2019, it was estimated that almost 9 million visits were made to forest estates during an eight-month period.

During last year, under the circumstances of the pandemic, many more people, including me, will have reacquainted themselves with the natural environment. I feel lucky to have been able to exercise by running through the Slieveanorra and Garvagh forests or to go for walks and introduce my newborn granddaughter to the beauty of the Glenariff and Portglenone forests on many occasions during the past year. I suspect that, even when normality returns, those are habits that I and many others will keep up. It was compelling to witness individuals using forests and woodlands to exercise, walk the dog and meet up

safely with family and friends in outdoor settings as the restrictions allowed.

I have no doubt that, when he gets up to speak, the Minister will find some way to negatively connect the motion to the positive advancement, yesterday, of the Climate Change Bill's moving to Committee Stage. He will have to get over that and accept that the majority of MLAs in the Chamber want to see more ambition on the climate and environment than that to which he has, thus far, been prepared to accede. Yesterday's vote proved that. I hope that he takes note of that.

**Mr Storey:** I thank my colleague from North Antrim for giving way. Will he and those who were vociferous in the House yesterday accept that the greatest custodians of the environment, peatlands and forests are the very farmers whom they, with their Climate Change Bill, want to actually put out of business?

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

**Mr McGuigan:** I will accept the first part of the Member's assertion. Yesterday, everybody stated that we cannot achieve climate progress without the custodians of the environment, who are the farmers. However, the Bill is not about the decimation of rural communities; it is about protecting those rural communities and the role that farmers in those communities have for future generations beyond the current one.

I was just talking about the vote yesterday. I suppose that the Minister's mind is on another, upcoming vote. Maybe, after Friday, he will find himself in a different position. Time will tell. Either way, there is plenty of time left within the mandate for him, if he remains the Agriculture Minister, to proactively and progressively bring forward a strategy on the issue in the motion and many other strategies that would set the course to protect and advance environmental policies in the North for the benefit of all citizens.

**Mr Harvey:** At the outset of my remarks, I want to take the opportunity to join other Members in paying tribute to the many agencies and individuals who fought the recent fire in the Mourne. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and Forest Service, alongside the UK and Irish coastguards and the council all played a role. I wish to echo the words and thanks that have already been given.

It is sad to say that the recent fire in the Mourne Mountains has caused untold damage to the biodiversity, wildlife and natural habitats of the area. Without the dedicated and professional efforts of everyone who was involved, the devastation could have been even worse. It will take time to assess the scale of the damage that has been inflicted on the environment.

I know that the Minister has already outlined his commitment to work with the relevant stakeholders to rebuild, restore and, most importantly, learn from this tragic event.

### 3.00 pm

We must all engage in seeking to prevent any recurrence of the scenes that we witnessed, with the silhouette of the blazing Mourne countryside against the night sky. Prevention must be our key focus as the work commences to repair the environmental damage. Greater enforcement and targeted legislation are required to deal with the

problem. We cannot afford to take our environment for granted, particularly given its importance to tourism and local communities.

Mention has been made of the need for the greater use of firebreaks to limit future damage in light of the sheer size of the area affected by the recent fire. That must be seriously considered for the future. The addition of 2-metre firebreaks could significantly protect heathland and limit future risk. I am aware that the Minister is committed to working closely with the National Trust, which has responsibility for a considerable part of the upper Mourne, to identify the scale of the damage, establish a recovery plan and ensure that funding is provided to allow the roots of recovery to take hold as soon as possible. I welcome those commitments.

The Department has also recognised that Northern Ireland's density of woodland lags behind the rest of the UK and other jurisdictions. That recognition has been evident in the initiatives that the Minister has recently commenced to tackle the problem. The Forests for our Future scheme is one of those initiatives, and I was delighted to hear this week that 670,000 trees have so far been planted as a result of that programme. Of course, that is a component of the green growth strategy being spearheaded by DAERA, of which the development of a peatland strategy will be an important strand. Woodland creation is a simple, low-cost option to improve our landscape and remove carbon from the atmosphere to help meet the UK's net zero carbon target by 2050. It does not just provide economic benefits and incentives to farms: it enhances biodiversity in local areas and increases carbon capture.

The recent wildfires have highlighted the need for greater protection of our heathlands, peatlands and key environmental assets as a whole. The strategies that the Minister has committed to will no doubt result in further legislative underpinning and protections, which will be needed to ensure that we not only rewild those areas but protect them for the future, as, the motion rightly states, will be needed.

**Ms Ennis:** This morning, a Sinn Féin delegation led by Chris Hazzard, the MP for South Down, and including the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, joined the National Trust to survey the damage caused by last month's devastating fire in the Mourne. I spoke to my colleagues prior to coming into the Chamber for the debate to get their feedback, and they spoke of the impact and the effect on our wildlife and sensitive habitats as apocalyptic. The motion acknowledges the heroic efforts by the fire and rescue services in tackling the fire in the way that they did. I reiterate my thanks and those of the people across South Down and beyond to the men and women who battled acres of blazing peatland with shovels in the most oppressive heat and in a gruelling location.

The Mourne are an area of outstanding natural beauty. They are an iconic natural asset not just for this region but for the island as a whole. During the last year, they have taken on a greater significance for people, with many trekking and hiking in them and some people discovering their majesty for the first time. That is one of the only positives to come out of COVID over the last year. However, the Mourne are more than just a nice place to spend a day. Their peatlands and heathlands are special areas of conservation, and they are designated for

their wildlife and habitats. Recently, I heard the Economy Minister encouraging people to holiday at home and take advantage of the natural assets that we have on our doorsteps. That is great — of course we want people to people to come to south Down — but the Economy Minister and her Department need to get real about the impact of increased tourism on places like south Down, Kilbroney, the areas around Carlingford lough and, of course, the Mournes. I call on her to make funding available from her Department to mitigate the impact that increased tourism will have.

Some 3 square kilometres of the Mournes were burned, including vital peatland. A large number of nesting birds were waiting on their young to hatch, and we have many other forms of wildlife that contribute to the delicate ecosystem that exists in the Mournes. As my colleague alluded to, peatlands lock away carbon, which is an essential function in helping Ireland and Britain to meet their targets in reducing greenhouse gases. Put simply, we just cannot afford to lose that amount of peatland. It was not a one-off event. The area has been burnt before, and we know that certain species simply have not recovered from the last event. Every time we have a wildfire, particularly if it is on the scale that we have experienced in the Mournes in recent years, we lose more and more vital plant life, animals, insects and, of course, peatland.

I cannot let the debate go by without talking about gorse fires and land clearing. We know that the latest fire in the Mournes was started deliberately. The Minister suggested at the time that it could have been a result of day trippers hiking up the Mournes in their flip-flops and lighting barbecues. Maybe it was, or maybe the more plausible explanation is that it was a result of land clearing. Certainly, the intent was to cause damage, but what we can all hopefully agree on is that gorse burning as a means of clearing land is not the way to do it and should not be incentivised.

I know that the relevant agencies are continuing their investigations. Hopefully, they will be successful in their efforts, but what will the punishment be? The judicial process for such matters is wholly inadequate. A small fine will probably be the result. The punishment for this type of arson should match the crime of destroying a natural asset.

The majority of farmers care greatly for the environment, but Governments North and South must work with farmers to enable them to transition to practices that do not necessitate such destruction. Governments must also manage and protect our areas of natural beauty instead of prostituting them for economic gain. There is a draft peatlands strategy gathering dust in the Department: let us get it off the shelf and get it published.

As I said in the Chamber a couple of weeks ago, £4.5 million has been spent by the Fire and Rescue Service on tackling wildfires, yet local management groups like the Mourne Heritage Trust receive only a fraction of that to manage and protect the Mournes. We have got our priorities all wrong with that, and something needs to change. I am delighted that, following his visit to the Mournes this morning, the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, has pledged to make the necessary funding available to help repair the damage. We know that we will need expert ecologists and biologists to be brought in to assess the damage, and Minister Murphy has pledged

that there will be no more looking down the back of the sofa for pennies to help repair the damage that has been caused. However, throwing money at it is not the answer. It will not be enough if we do not have a plan. We need a plan, and I call on the Minister to establish a task force and a round-table discussion immediately that will involve central government, councils and various agencies and landowners putting the necessary action plans in place to protect and repair our most precious environments.

**Ms S Bradley:** As a representative from the SDLP and particularly as a South Down representative, I am honoured to put my name to the motion. At the outset, I, like other Members, put on record my thanks to the brave firefighters who stepped up in the recent wildfires in the Mournes and played their part in bringing that fire under control. The report stated that there were in excess of 100 firefighters and partner agencies from across the island involved in tackling the fires and bringing them under control. We owe all those individuals a huge debt of gratitude for the tremendous work that they did. It has to be said that that work was quite perilous at times. There was without doubt a sense that it was a major incident, and, as information rolled out across the community, it became abundantly clear that it was a major incident; in fact, I will quote the assistant chief fire and rescue officer, Aidan Jennings, who said about the fire that it was:

*“undoubtedly one of the most challenging gorse fires Firefighters have ever had to deal with.”*

The firefighters, alongside their public service partners, have to be thanked.

We must also take a moment to thank the local community, which played its part in supporting those teams. I am sure that many Members will be aware of him, but I can think of one person who epitomises that public spirit, and that is young Charlie Thomson, aged 12. I understand that his dad is a lifeboat volunteer, so he comes from good stock and understands the roles played by volunteers and all those who work for our emergency services.

Young Charlie expressed to his mum his desire to do something to try to help the firefighters who were up there representing and helping all of us. In a very short time, he managed to raise, I believe, £1,900, which was used to bring snacks and water to the firefighters. As the flames rose to mighty heights on Slieve Donard and elsewhere in the Mournes, so, too, did that community spirit, and, to my mind, Charlie Thomson epitomised that. I thank Charlie and all the community representatives who played similar roles in assisting those who were helping us.

Peatlands, and fens and bogs in particular, create ecosystems with a unique quality. We need to understand their history. That landscape has evolved since the last ice age, so it is in our interests to ensure that we do everything in our power not only to sustain and protect it but to make sure that our life habits work in unison with it. It is unique, but it is a fragile type of landscape that requires our support. I, like many others, genuinely welcome the fact that many people have reconnected with outdoor spaces as a result of COVID. However, there is no denying that, as going to those spaces becomes more routine, we must all educate ourselves better on how we support and protect the very environments that we are enjoying.

South Down is, in my view, the jewel in the crown of Northern Ireland's outdoor offering. It is no surprise to me that not only people from south Down want to enjoy our beautiful natural environment. We want to build a tourism strategy that will attract people to the area. We must do that in a really sensitive way, appreciating that we have to make sure —

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

**Ms S Bradley:** I will indeed. We have to make sure that all policies, including the ones that the motion asks for, are developed in a way that protects those lands. Any policy must be fully resourced. We should go forward on the basis of that resourcing, which will have a direct effect on protecting the biodiversity that we inherited.

**Mr Wells:** We are privileged to have the Minister with us. Before he inevitably moves on to higher things, I will use this short period of five minutes — hopefully six, if someone intervenes quickly — to ask him three pertinent questions about the motion.

Minister, do you accept that peatlands have the most enormous potential to mitigate climate change in Northern Ireland? Their proper use could overcome some of the issues related to reducing stock levels that were raised yesterday. Eighteen per cent of our land in Northern Ireland is peatlands. At the minute, peatlands are a net contributor to carbon emissions, but, if properly utilised, they could be a vast store for carbon. The Department is funding projects on the Garron in Antrim and Cuilcagh in Fermanagh. Can the Minister guarantee that those will continue? Can he explain why his Department still allows the destruction of peatlands when we know that they have such potential for carbon storage? Why are we giving planning permission for peat extraction and the development of peatlands when they have so much potential to store carbon? Why has the Department not completed the area of special scientific interest, special protection area and special area of conservation designations? The Act came in in 1985, and I am able to tell him how long ago that was because I was in the Chamber when it passed. Here we are, 36 years later, and we still have not completed our ASSI designation.

We still have not given protection to the habitats mentioned in the motion. That is question 1, Minister.

### 3.15 pm

Question 2 is about afforestation, which is absolutely essential to the storage of carbon in Northern Ireland. Why, oh why is his Department giving grant aid and consent to using exotic coniferous species such as Sitka spruce, lodgepole pine and Norway spruce? We all read 'Farming Life', which is the official journal of the honourable Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Irwin. He is in it every week, and I think that he has shares in 'Farming Life'. He is certainly one of its major contributors. I read it every week just to find out what Mr Irwin is saying to me, and it is all good stuff. I read this week's article, which talks about a wonderful new scheme to plant 50 hectares of woodland in north Antrim. "Great," I said, until I read the text, which said that half of the first tranche would be foreign alien species, which do nothing for biological conservation and do very little for the sequestration of carbon. That is question 2, Minister.

Question 3 is this: when will his Department take fires in the Mourne seriously? I will use parliamentary privilege here, Mr Deputy Speaker. In May 2019, there was a serious fire on the Leitrim Road adjacent to Castlewella forest park. The landowner, a Mr King, deliberately lit that fire. I believe that I have privilege: he deliberately lit that fire. Forest Service staff approached Mr King and said that, if he did not put the fire out, it would spread to Castlewella forest park and cause a lot of damage to public land. He ignored them, and what happened? The fire then spread to Castlewella forest park, causing enormous damage. I provided the name of the culprit to the police, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the Department's Forest Service, but absolutely nothing was done. There was no interview, and nor was there any potential prosecution. Had an example been made of that individual, it would have sent out a massive signal to the community that we will not tolerate such actions.

As Ms Ennis said, those fires are not accidental. They are caused by landowners burning off vegetation in the spring to increase yields. Why do they occur in April and May and not in August? It is because there is no benefit in setting light to the mountainside in August; it is done in April and May. Before the Minister moves on to much higher things, his Department needs to deal with the situation immediately.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I remind Members that it is up to them to ensure that anything that they say is within the law and any protections that may exist.

**Ms Armstrong:** I thank the proposers of the motion; it is an important debate. I will have to recommend myself for disciplinary action because I find myself agreeing with Mr Wells far too much.

**Mr Wells:** Oh, no. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Armstrong:** Of course I support the motion. I am one of those people who are affectionately known as "tree huggers". Like the Minister's colleague, my colleague in Strangford Jim Shannon MP, I have planted many trees, and I maintain a wildlife sanctuary on the Ards peninsula. If only we had more trees. However, as Mr Wells said, my commitment is to natural trees that are native to Northern Ireland, which should be protected. I agree with him that invasive external species should not be used here.

We have a vibrant biodiversity in Northern Ireland, but it is being harmed by red tape. While I absolutely agree with the Minister's planned Forests for Our Future project, I have a concern that, when planning permission goes forward through different councils across Northern Ireland, the red tape ties them up and they cannot proactively protect woodlands; in fact, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), which is supposed to look after our environment, is at times tied up with red tape. That is why I support the idea of an independent environment agency.

I agree with the RSPB, which has called for the need to resource fully a strategy to protect, preserve and enhance our peatlands and woodlands. As part of that resourcing and as part of the Minister of Finance's review of building regulations, I would like Minister Poots to take forward some further support with planners to ensure that woods can be protected. There is a quarry in my area that has been defunct for over 50 years. There is a woodland that

a developer is trying to develop, and the planning officers say that their hands are tied.

I have to say that the destruction of wildlife that is happening is not on.

There is not as much peatland in my constituency as there is in others. I watched my neighbouring mountains in South Down burn. What a sight it was to see, just beyond the Ards peninsula, the sky lit up bright red that night. All that I could think of was the Fire and Rescue Service personnel, who, at that time, were battling down the fires with shovels and coping with all that smoke. It is really hard to imagine the nightmare in which they were working. It is amazing that they managed to get the fires out. We did not have rain over that time, unfortunately. It came a bit later the next week. How many people have to put their life in danger, however, before the issue is dealt with? I agree with Mr Wells that there needs to be stronger legislation in place so that, when people are found to be breaking environmental laws, more can be done. I absolutely support the Minister in taking something forward.

Minister, you said in your statement on 26 April 2021:

*"We cannot afford to take our environment for granted." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 138, p138, col 1].*

I do not think that you do. I know that you said that the £340 million associated with the European Union should be provided directly through Westminster and not via the Barnett consequentials, and I would love to see a strategy developed for how we can get that amount of money invested in our environment in Northern Ireland.

I know that a lot of farmers are concerned about the Climate Change Bill that is going through the House. They are the custodians of our environment. I live in a rural area, surrounded by farmers, and I know many farmers who are saying, "If we are part of the discussions on that, we can help and improve things". In fact, Jim Shannon MP said in the House of Commons:

*"All types of moorland need some land management to maintain the protected and rare habitats and the species that thrive in them."*

We will depend on our farmers to do that.

Today's motion is calling for resources to ensure that our peatlands and woodlands can be protected, but that cannot be done just by the House. Rather, it has to be done in partnership with others, such as our councils and the NIEA. The Environment and Climate Change Committee in Westminster wanted to ban the burning of peatlands by 2020. Why can we not be that strident? Why do we not try to achieve something that forward-thinking? Our schools, our planning departments and our councils all have a role to play. Minister, I will support you to the hilt if you take that measure forward. We cannot stop looking after our environment because some people want to have planned burning, which risks so much of our habitat.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Members, at last week's Business Committee, it was agreed that, in some circumstances, the Speaker may add a little time to time-limited debates. I have decided to exercise that discretion today, so the remaining two Members who wish to speak will have five minutes each in which to do so.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The Minister will know the area that I speak of fairly well, as it is in a neighbouring constituency. I am from the townland of the Montiaghs, and some people may know that it takes seven Derries to make a Montiagh. The area in which I was born is called Derrymore, and "Doire Mór" means "big oak tree", but no one would know from where we get our place names, because of a lot of the woodland and native species have all but disappeared. Indeed, Mr Wells will know it exceptionally well, particularly Portmore Lough, where we have the excellent RSPB sanctuary. The preservation of the lowland around Portmore Lough is managed by the RSPB, which I commend for its efforts.

I join others in commenting on the courage and tenacity of the firefighters and, indeed, the local community on the evening of the fire in the Mourne. I also join Mr Blair in marking the fact that the 10 people who were murdered by British Army forces in Ballymurphy have been found innocent today. I pay tribute to them and to their families, who have not only restored their relatives' reputations but highlighted some of the truth of the past, which the Secretary of State seems determined to bury.

I will return to the debate in hand, I know that a number of Members have spoken about peatlands and woodlands and the importance of those environments for rewilding. In the short time that is available to me, however, I will touch specifically on a strategy that, hopefully, the Minister will soon publish and consult on, as well as on the importance of monitoring and reporting, which are key elements of any strategy going forward.

I also ask that that evaluation look at the greenhouse gas emissions inventories as well as reporting successes because we need to learn from best practice elsewhere. Indeed, I think that it was Mr Blair who referred to the investments that the other jurisdictions in these islands are making and the targets that they are setting. I implore the Minister to include similar asks in his strategy.

I also think that communication is important. It is only over the past few years, I have to confess, that I have learned of the importance of peatlands to decarbonisation, which Mr Wells highlighted. Where I come from, we call it turf rather than peat. In north Antrim, my father-in-law cuts peat, whereas my grandfather cut turf. I used to go with him when he was cutting the turf down in the moss. That is something that we would now frown upon, but, in those days, much of it was borne of necessity, as it provided a fuel that people could not otherwise afford and did not have many other options available to them.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs D Kelly:** Yes, I will.

**Mr Wells:** First, I agree entirely with the Member. However, as we speak this afternoon, there are thousands of acres of this crucial habitat, which has the capacity to absorb vast amounts of carbon, being destroyed for horticulture, for fuel, for development or for drainage. Does she not accept that that is madness, given what we now know about peatlands?

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for his intervention because I think that his point is well made. I am not sure whether it is the Minister who is before an examination

with a vote later this week or Mr Wells so that he can be allowed back into the fold.

**Mr Wells:** *[Interruption.] [Laughter.]*

**Mrs D Kelly:** It is interesting.

The Member is right. I know that the Minister is looking at the rural development policy and at how we invest in diversification. Special attention has to be paid to those whose livelihoods depend upon the peatlands. They have to be asked to rethink and to be guardians of much of the land that they own. Communication and education have to be at the centre of a peatlands strategy. I am only finding out about it, yet I grew up with it and loved it and knew about the native species such as the corncrake.

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

**Mrs D Kelly:** If biodiversity and the various species are to be protected and enhanced, communication and cultural values must form part of the Minister's strategy.

**Miss Woods:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I am last but not least. Like others, I thank the emergency services and the local community for their actions in tackling the horrific fires that we all witnessed engulf the Mourne a few weeks ago. I also thank all those who heeded warnings not to go to the area to allow people to do their job and make the area safe. Thanks must also go to those NGOs that continue to fight the good fight against the effects of climate breakdown and biodiversity loss, delivering positive change.

We know how important our woodlands and peatlands are for our environment and the crucial role that they play as part of nature-based solutions. We have also been blessed with a disproportionate share of the world's scarce peatlands, but we have been, and continue to be, poor guardians of that precious resource. The cost of restoring our blanket bogs has been calculated to be less than the costs of dealing with the effects of climate change. Therefore not only can we reduce carbon emissions but we can lock it up, and we can continue to do so in the future, as well as filter our water, control flooding, provide niche habitats for wildlife and enhance our tourist offering. So, what is stopping us? As we have heard, peatlands provide significant natural capital benefits, including carbon storage, water purification, flood prevention, habitat restoration and improved air quality.

The all-party group on climate action, which I chair and of which, I am glad to say, Mr Wells is a prominent member, recently heard that, in England, a £640 million nature for climate fund has been established, with a significant proportion allocated to peatland restoration. The Scottish Government have allocated £250 million for peatlands over the next 10 years. The Welsh national peatlands action programme 2020-25 committed £1 million a year over the next five years.

In the Republic, too, €108 million is committed to rehabilitating former peat extraction sites. In the presentation that we were given, we were shown a table in which Northern Ireland had question marks beside it. I hope that the Minister can fill in some of the blanks for the House on exactly how much his Department is putting towards peatland recovery, as well as providing an update on where the Department's promised strategy is.

### 3.30 pm

This is not just a job for DAERA. The motion must also extend to the remit of other Ministers, such as the Minister for Infrastructure, as we are dealing with ammonia pollution. Also, the power to grant large-scale peat extraction lies with the planning authorities. Properly addressing the issue will require buy-in from Finance, Economy, Infrastructure and Education, as well as local communities and NGOs. It must be joined up — joined-up thinking, policy-making and funding — to enable nature to start getting joined up again. As we know, nature is remarkably resilient and capable of regeneration, if we just allow it to happen and manage it properly.

We need to plant the right trees in the right places, and there must be a strategic approach to woodland creation that is integrated with other land use considerations. That will involve, crucially, as Ms Armstrong has said, local councils, as part of local development plans and community planning, and other organisations in our communities that are leading the way. Rather than the scattergun approach of offering grants for planting spruce, for example, there needs to be a tree and woodland strategy for Northern Ireland to ensure that the right trees, the native species, are planted in the right places. Of course, peatland and woodland strategies must be part of a nature recovery network.

The debate further shows the need for an independent environmental protection agency for Northern Ireland, and we in the Green Party have consistently called for that New Decade, New Approach commitment to be honoured. The Assembly has even voted in favour of a motion calling for its establishment, but that promise has been kicked down the line to, perhaps, the next mandate. Again, on a crucial matter, the Executive fail to deliver. The need for an IEPA has never been greater. Northern Ireland is the most nature-depleted part of the United Kingdom, which is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. We cannot continue like this. I support the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call on the Minister, Edwin Poots, to respond to the debate.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** A significant wildfire started in the Mourne Mountains on Friday 23 April and lasted until Sunday 25 April. I visited the scene on Saturday 24 April and saw at first hand the invaluable role of our emergency services. I took the opportunity to speak to the personnel at the site and saw up close the extremely difficult terrain and the challenging conditions in which they had to work. I also note the practical support provided by the community and businesses to the emergency services.

I gave a detailed oral statement to the Assembly in response to the wildfire on 26 April. In that statement, I paid tribute to the emergency services involved in the response to the wildfire, Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and PSNI, in particular, for the outstanding dedication, professionalism and bravery of the firefighters, who put their health, welfare and, potentially, their lives at risk. I acknowledge the exceptional work of the emergency services to get the fire under control. I also pay tribute to the Forest Service, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the UK coastguard, Irish Coast Guard and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, and I acknowledge the practical support provided by the local community



and business. I extend my thanks to and acknowledge the role of the National Trust, Mourne Heritage Trust and Sky Watch NI in assisting with the response to the fire and supporting the emergency services.

Sustainability is at the heart of my Department's thinking, and we need to have a balance in utilising our natural resources to provide much of our food and wood, while not overexploiting that finite natural capital. The Mournes are an excellent example of a natural resource being used for a multitude of purposes for everyone's benefit. It provides farmland, forestry and other employment. It is also an important resource for recreation, tourism and general employment. The Mournes contain areas of peatland that are in a good ecological state, soak up carbon and assist in combating climate change. That is a key challenge for both DAERA and the Executive generally, and we are taking forward a green growth strategy. Peatlands can alleviate flooding and are an important habitat for many species. Actions that degrade our peatlands, including wildfires and erosion through overgrazing or by walkers, can happen within a relatively short time. People must take responsibility for their actions, and we cannot overestimate the impact that reckless behaviour can have on our environment.

I recently highlighted my concerns to the Minister of Justice, as well as the need for enforcement, legislation and greater cross-departmental working. Unfortunately, it could take several decades of careful management to restore those habitats to a good ecological condition. Given the time it takes to restore habitats, we need a new approach to firebreaks. Prevention is much more effective than cure. On the balance of risk, we must look at policies around controlled burning or flailing of heather etc to create firebreaks. Do we sacrifice, for example, 10 hectares of habitat to save 1,000 hectares of habitat? Those are not, as Mr Hazzard described them, arsonists. They are people who know and manage the environment in an extremely good way.

Another way of managing this is appropriate grazing management. That would help to reduce the amount of fuel available. I highlight the excellent work that my Department has carried out at the CAFRE hill farm at Glenwherry. I encourage any Member to visit that facility and see what is going on there. Since 2008, CAFRE's hill farm has used a gamekeeper to contribute to the management of heather moorland through an annual process of up to 20 controlled small-strip burns, each of up to 0.1 hectare. Using a flail to create a wet firebreak allows an accurate and fast cool burn and results in a habitat mosaic of different heather heights, which is particularly useful for ground-nesting birds. That process has also been used to create protective firebreaks against pockets of tall vegetation on neighbouring land and coniferous forests.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Poots:** Yes, I will.

**Mr Wells:** We are aware of Glenwherry, but that is not what is going on in the Mournes and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. People are not using controlled burning, and they are not using controlled burning outside the nesting season. The first period of hot weather they get, they go out onto the moor and they deliberately set fire to the moor in order to produce the regrowth of grass that they desire. Then they walk away, and it burns all of their land and a lot

of other land. That is what we need to control, not what the Minister is suggesting, which, of course, we all welcome.

**Mr Poots:** At this moment in time, anybody burning is breaking the law. From mid-April — I will consider bringing that date forward — they are breaking the law and should be prosecuted. I have raised the issue with NIEA, which has that responsibility. When I was visiting the Mournes, I was taken to a site at Tollymore where an extensive fire had taken place. It extended into other property and did considerable damage, as Mr Wells identified, at Castlewellan in the previous year.

Getting back to the issue, proper controlled management can make a real difference, and we need to ensure that that is available. Peatland management with appropriate grazing — not overgrazing or under-grazing — works much better than wilding, as evidenced in Scotland. When many crofters left the hills, biodiversity decreased. Cutting will not be a reality for many areas. Wetting is a necessity — a necessity — to capture carbon in our peatlands. I hope that Members, when we bring forward the proposals to wet peatlands, will not be coming to me representing constituents, saying, "You can't do it in this area, you can't do it in that area". I suspect that some people will maybe eat their words at that point. Appropriate management, as demonstrated at Glenwherry, has led to an increase in ground-nesting birds across a range of peatland species, including snipe, curlew, lapwing, hen harriers and red grouse, as well as a recovery in Irish hares.

I want to note the investment in our environment, habitats and wildlife via a range of environmental schemes. Only last week, I announced tranche 5 of the EFS. I also announced the opening last week of the environmental challenge fund of £2 million, which will deliver for the environment in respect of habitats and species improvements. We will continue to build on that progress, but we must be honest: we need to deal with the minority of people who do not respect our natural habitat. Whether they be farmers who burn inappropriately or people who leave disposable barbecues or campfires, they can undo all the good work of others.

In the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, all political parties in Northern Ireland:

*"recognise the need for a coordinated and strategic approach to the challenge of climate change"*

and the loss of biodiversity. It was accepted that:

*"Actions and interventions will be required across a wide range of areas in order to address both the immediate and longer term impacts of climate change"*

and loss of biodiversity

*"in a fair and just way."*

It is in that context that peatland restoration offers a major opportunity for safeguarding biodiversity — so the answer to Mr Wells's first question is yes — increasing carbon storage and sequestration, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions through the Northern Ireland peatlands strategy.

I hope to announce that strategy very soon.

In addition, a large body of evidence exists that demonstrates the value that peatland restoration has on enhancing the delivery of ecosystem services. I mentioned

flood attenuation, food production, providing areas for recreation and an understanding of our cultural heritage, all of which provide a significant return on investment. The publication in the near future and the implementation of the Northern Ireland peatland strategy will offer a framework to guide the conservation and restoration of semi-natural peatland habitats in Northern Ireland. It will also reflect the commitments of the 'UK Peatland Strategy', which was published in 2018. Implementation of the strategy will also play an important role in the Department's work on climate change and the wider green growth agenda.

I have no doubt that, had the Assembly not been crashed by Sinn Féin for three years, we would have a peatland strategy, but it was, and we do not. The Department is considering new CAP policies, including agri-environmental policies and support for peatland restoration. Capital works and ongoing management will be considered as those policies develop. Wetting is by far the best means of restoring the peatland habitat.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Will the Minister confirm that in drawing up the peatland strategy he is doing so in conjunction with other Ministers, such as the Minister for Infrastructure?

**Mr Poots:** I am glad that the Member mentioned the Minister for Infrastructure. Mr Wells raised a number of points about planning, extracting peat and so forth, but those questions should not be directed to me. They should be directed to the Minister for Infrastructure. I encourage him to lobby that Minister on the issues that he raised. I am not sure what time I have left, so I will move on.

Planting woodland in order to remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere is a cost-effective way to contribute to the offset of emissions while providing many other social and environmental benefits. In order to support an increase in the rate of afforestation, I launched Forests for our Future, which aims to plant 9,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030. That is in line with the recommendations in the Climate Change Committee's report 'Reducing emissions in Northern Ireland', which was published in 2019. To date, 670,000 trees have been validated under the Forests for our Future programme.

I will comment on an issue that Mr Wells and some others raised about indigenous species only. Yes, I want to see as many indigenous trees planted as possible, but the Sitka spruce and other coniferous trees have the capacity to capture carbon. When they are young, they capture carbon in a very substantial way. They are harvested and reused for pencils, fencing posts and all sorts of wood. That is not a bad thing. We will encourage as much planting of indigenous trees as possible, but that does not mean that we will not accept any planting of other trees, because they have and serve a purpose. Whilst they will be harvested and replanted, they will continue to engage in carbon sequestration, so it is not all bad, even though I have a preference for the native species.

I recently published the findings of a forest visitor survey that was conducted in 2019. It showed that annual visits to forests increased from 4.7 million in 2014 to almost 9 million. Forests provide many opportunities for people to meet, exercise and enjoy the beautiful surroundings. During the last year, Forest Service and its partner organisations experienced a further increase in visits to our forests due to the significant investment that has been

made in forestry recreation facilities in recent years and as a result of people wanting to enjoy our countryside while living under COVID-19 restrictions.

Northern Ireland's forests and woodland face many threats. Some of those are related to the natural environment and, therefore, are interrelated in complex ways. Others are due to the behaviour of people. Protecting forests and woodland requires careful planning and collaborative working across effective partnerships. My Department continues to implement surveillance and monitoring plans for the most damaging pests and pathogens of trees and reviews the pest-specific response plans in the event of a finding. Work continues on importing controls in order to maintain protected zone status and horizon scanning for new and emerging threats. In response to the risk of fire, the Department's Forest Service annually reviews and implements its emergency fire plan. That was operated effectively within the SLA arrangements with the NI Fire and Rescue Service, and it proved to be effective in the operation to control the wildfire in the Mourne and a significant forest fire in Knock forest in County Fermanagh during the same weekend.

I am pleased to note that the domestic and world demand for timber construction, fencing and packaging products remained strong through the pandemic and that the Northern Ireland wood-processing sector continues to build on its competitive market position. That is ongoing and necessary. Much has been achieved, and much more is to be achieved. I will not be behind the door in ensuring that we do that work to restore our peatlands.

### 3.45 pm

Rightly, Miss Woods indicated what is going on in the Republic of Ireland. We did not have the same level of industrial harvesting of our peatlands. There has been some but not on the massive scale that it happened in many areas in the Republic of Ireland. We have to meet this challenge. We have to recognise that our tree planting must be in the right locations as well. We should not be planting trees in peatland areas where there is the potential for the trees to take away the moisture and water, thereby causing further drying of the peatlands. We know what needs to be done.

I am delighted that Ms Ennis, on behalf of the Department of Finance, announced that Mr Murphy is to provide substantial funding to me. I look forward to receiving the letter, and my Department will ensure that the money is properly and appropriately spent. I am glad that she made that announcement today.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** For clarity, has the Minister given way?

**Mr Poots:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** As I said earlier, it is like trying to hit a moving target as the Member moves on to greater and higher things. He said that he did not have time to take an intervention, but there are a few seconds left. One point that he needs to deal with, and the House is, I think, unanimous on this today, is that he must not use taxpayers' money to promote the planting of exotic foreign species in Northern Ireland. By all means, if people want to plant

Sitka spruce, they can, but not by using his money, the Department's money or taxpayers' money. That has to be the way forward.

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for reiterating his point.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call Patsy McGlone to make his winding-up speech on the debate. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank all who contributed for their input into a very thoughtful debate. A number of key themes ran through it. The first was specific to the fire on the Mournes, the recklessness of those who caused it and the damage done. Members spoke about the damage to the future environment and how that can, in some way, be redeemed by strategies down the line. Multiple Members thanked the various services involved — rightly so — including DAERA, the NIEA, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service in particular, the police, community groups, local farmers and landowners, and, of course, young Charlie Thomson, who was mentioned a couple of times by Sinéad Bradley.

The final key theme was the need for cross-departmental strategies as a way forward for peatland protection, tourism promotion and the educational requirements contained in those strategies. My colleague Colin McGrath described the beauty of the Mournes and their tourism potential, and he outlined what was required to protect the flora. He mentioned the input of local organisations and the support that farmers require to preserve the habitats. He referred to the international seminar on wildfires that took place in Newry. He talked about the frequency of those wildfires and the damage to the flora and fauna. Like many others, he recorded his support for the emergency services.

Supporting the motion, William Irwin also referred to the blaze in the mountains and the efforts made by local people. He expressed his gratitude to the emergency services. He referred to the woodlands resource and the Minister's strategy for tree planting. He talked about the publication of a peatland strategy, which the Minister later referred to, and its importance in tackling climate change.

Likewise, Declan McAleer, Chair of the AERA Committee, thanked the emergency services. He referred to the important environmental aspect of habitats and especially to the problem of the damage done by these fires — whether deliberately or by accident — in his constituency, which placed a risk on biodiversity or, indeed, eliminated biodiversity in those areas. That biodiversity may not be restored, or it may take a long time to be restored. He also referred to the implications of the compensatory amounts to assist farmers with the burden of the cost of repairs and to the risk to life, property, farm businesses and natural habitat.

Rosemary Barton, in favour of the motion, spoke about the heartbreaking sight of the fire in the Mournes and thanked all those who were involved in at least trying to stop it and to retrieve some grounds that otherwise would have been jeopardised and deeply at risk. She referred to local community groups and the need for the preservation and protection of areas. Of course, as I expect her to, she also called for education to be part of the process so that people who use those beautiful locations behave responsibly and are aware of the environment around them.

John Blair brought us to the realities and practicalities of Governments putting their money where their mouth is. He

talked about the restoration of 35,000 hectares in England. Similarly, Rachel Woods referred to the investment in Scotland and Wales and, likewise, about €108 million for restorations in the Republic and for the schemes to bring about new environments in areas that were bespoiled or likely to be at risk. That is very important.

Maurice Bradley looked ahead to the future of the environment and talked about the preservation of the planet when he referred to giving our "children and our children's children" a better environment. Being an experienced and seasoned fisherman, he knows the implications that that has for some of our waterways. Philip McGuigan referred to problems in localities in his constituency, between Loughguile and the glens, where fires caused environmental carnage. He spoke in favour of rural communities being custodians of the environment.

Harry Harvey painted a picture of the blazing Mournes against the night sky. In some circumstances, that would be regarded as poetic or picturesque, but it was far from it; the reality was the damage being done on the other side of the vista. He referred to greater use of firebreaks, funding for the required recovery and the need to meet net zero commitments. Likewise, Sinéad Ennis referred to meeting the National Trust, along with her colleagues. She acknowledged the efforts of the Fire and Rescue Service and the local communities. She called on the Minister for the Economy to increase investment in tourism and job creation in the Mournes area. She referred to the storage of carbon in peatlands. She also referred to the common theme of whether the gorse fire was started deliberately and about the need for protections and a draft peatlands strategy.

Sinéad Bradley thanked the firefighters for bringing the fire under control and talked about the challenges that local communities face as a result of the fire. She referred to the fact that, while this last 12 months has been a very sad period for many due to COVID and the problems arising from it — I have been in touch with a number of families — it has nevertheless allowed many people to reconnect with nature and to become more aware of the nature around them. She spoke about the need for education. Some people have been self-educating and have been to places that they have never been to before. Others need to be educated so that they are aware of the risk that they can potentially bring with them.

Mr Wells, in very sharp and clear form, referred to the need for peatlands, which can be a vast store for carbon. He questioned the issue of ongoing planning permission for peatlands. He referred to afforestation and, of course, made the point that the use of foreign exotic alien species should be avoided when public money is being used.

He queried why, in situations in which DAERA is involved, along with emergency services such as the police, and allegations have been made about someone being a culprit or being responsible for, in effect, arson, that matter is not taken further. He also called for stronger enforcement measures from the Department in cases in which blazes have been started deliberately.

Kellie Armstrong referred to herself as a committed tree hugger, and, again, her contribution had that awareness of the importance of nature and our surrounds. She outlined her party's stance — ours is similar — on having an independent environment agency. There is the whole question of woodlands' import for planning. With those

woodlands, where there is planning permission, it may not fall immediately within the Minister's remit, unless the NIEA has a crossover role there. I am not quite sure. Woodlands need to be protected as part of the planning process, however. She paid tribute to the Fire and Rescue Service.

My colleague Dolores Kelly referred to Doire Mór. County Doire, where I am from, was, in fact, once upon a time, covered with those large oak trees. They have been removed. That was many, many centuries ago. Nevertheless, it will be useful to see at least a modicum of regrowth and rebirth of those woodlands in many areas.

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGlone:** Certainly.

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member support me in seeking to allow oak trees to be imported from Great Britain once again? They are currently banned under the protocol.

**Mr McGlone:** I am sure that, like with everything else, the Minister will find a way in which to raise that issue at the Joint Committee, at which all such relevant issues are supposed to be raised. I wish him well in that. I am sure that many of the issues will be resolved through that mechanism, because that is why it was set up in the first place.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

**Mr McGlone:** OK. There were numerous other contributions, including one from Rachel Woods. The Minister responded to the debate by outlining his strategies, and I thank him for that. He referred to green growth. He also referred to CAFRE and its importance. I support that, and his announcement earlier today —

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

**Mr McGlone:** — was very welcome news. He also referred to planting woodlands.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their support for the motion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly pays tribute to the heroic efforts by those emergency service personnel from across these islands and the local community who responded to the recent wildfires in the Mourne; notes the importance of preserving the natural environment for improving air quality, biodiversity, carbon capture and combating the climate emergency; further notes the importance of both rewilding and protecting peatlands in tackling the climate emergency; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to produce fully resourced strategies and implementation plans to protect, preserve and enhance our peatlands and woodlands without further delay.*

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

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

**4.00 pm**

*Motion made:*

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]*

## Adjournment

### Enniskillen Bypass and A4 Upgrade

**Mr Speaker:** The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes.

**Ms Dolan:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I secured the Adjournment debate a fortnight ago, but the Minister for Infrastructure waited until this morning to release a statement on the same issue. That undermines the role of MLAs and the authority of the Chamber to hold Ministers to account. I ask the Speaker's Office to look into this to see whether proper procedure and protocol were followed.

**Mr Speaker:** This is the third time that the matter has been raised with me today. Members, and the Minister, of course, will know that I have written on a number of occasions throughout the last year, and since the start of the mandate, when, in my opinion, due respect was not paid to the Assembly. Most of that was inadvertent — there was no intention to disrespect the Assembly — but the net effect of not bringing statements to the Assembly or sticking to Assembly procedures was to show discourtesy at times.

I have to say, and have repeatedly said, that once I raised the matter with the Executive last year, all those respects to the Assembly were adhered to quite strictly, which pleased me. We then had a long time, in difficult circumstances, when all Ministers adhered to the normal respect for the Assembly and the rights of Members. However, the matter was raised with me twice this morning, regarding two Ministers.

I say directly to the Minister that, having seen that her statement was issued a number of hours ago, in advance of the Adjournment debate that was scheduled for this afternoon in the Order Paper, I can understand why a Member would feel aggrieved. It is not for me to judge why that happened, but I will write to the Executive again because I want to make sure that Ministers reflect on when they issue statements, particularly on sitting days and when the Minister is scheduled to come to a particular debate to make a statement.

We all know that Members do not often have an opportunity such as an Adjournment debate, or even a motion, to air an issue. I understand why Ms Dolan feels aggrieved. I ask the Minister, and all Ministers, to reflect on how they conduct business, particularly on plenary days. We will leave it at that.

**Ms Dolan:** Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for facilitating the debate today on a topic that my constituents and I feel very strongly about. I start by sending my condolences to my party and constituency colleague Seán Lynch MLA, and his family, on the recent death of his brother Brendan.

The Enniskillen bypass, the upgrading of the A4 road between Ballygawley and Enniskillen and the upgrading of the A4 road between Enniskillen and Belcoo are extremely important and need to be delivered without delay. Today's announcement that the Department for Infrastructure is progressing to the next stage of the Enniskillen bypass is very welcome. If anything, it proves at least that Adjournment debates such as this work, putting pressure on Ministers to listen to MLAs and to the people whom we represent.

I have a number of questions on the Minister's announcement. How long will it take to make the direction, vesting and bridge orders for the bypass scheme? I remind the Minister that the people of Fermanagh have waited too long as it stands. Moreover, considering the £722 million capital budget that the Department received this year, why was the bypass not included in this year's budget? The scheme is about £30 million and is huge value for money. Very little of that capital budget makes its way to Fermanagh as it is, and the Department has no maintenance budget going to Fermanagh for rail, motorways or dual carriageways, because Fermanagh has none.

Then, add in the fact that Fermanagh and Omagh district has the highest number of outstanding road repairs, with 1,339 surface defects.

The Department for Infrastructure is underspending and underinvesting massively in Fermanagh. In response to my question for written answer in March, the Minister stated that she had asked her officials to complete the work necessary to allow her to arrive at a decision on how the scheme should proceed. I hope that the Adjournment debate will help to focus the Minister's mind on the bypass. The project has been ongoing for 15 years: let us make this the final year.

I will now address the need for the upgrading of the entire A4 road from Ballygawley to Enniskillen and then onwards from Enniskillen to Belcoo, where it joins the N16 to Sligo. The two stretches of road, with the bypass in between, are like a three-legged stool. The bypass is welcome, but a one-legged stool will not stand on its own. It is well known and statistically proven that border areas perform poorly in comparison with other areas on the island of Ireland. The standout facts of that are economic productivity lagging behind the national average; a lower share of high-value economic sectors, which are more resilient in economic downturns; a higher share of manufacturing and construction sector jobs, which are more likely to be hit by economic downturns; and a so-called brain drain of young and talented people from the border areas.

Improving the A4 transport link would have a transformative effect on Fermanagh. Obviously, transport itself cannot resolve all of Fermanagh's economic difficulties. Any road infrastructure improvements have to be accompanied by investment in broadband and mobile coverage, Invest NI investment and education and skills development, which we are beginning to see with investment in the South West College in Enniskillen. Transport improvements, however, are vital to the economic sustainability of Fermanagh. The upgrading of the A4 is a necessity that the Department and the Minister for Infrastructure cannot ignore any longer.

As I mentioned, Fermanagh does not have even one mile of dual carriageway. We must be the only county in Ireland in that position. We are not getting a fair allocation of the Department for Infrastructure's budget, and that needs to change. Extending the dual carriageway from Ballygawley to Enniskillen would improve business confidence in Fermanagh and South Tyrone; encourage the skilled pool of workers currently resident there to remain and encourage others to return; facilitate and support the regeneration of the local economy; assist in the development and growth of indigenous industries; and

reduce the misconception of peripherality, particularly amongst tourists and businesses.

Hundreds of people leave their Fermanagh homes for work elsewhere and never return. That results in rural depopulation, which leads to several other consequences that affect rural communities socially and economically. Fermanagh has been neglected for too long, and we will not stand for it any longer. Some people snigger at how Fermanagh has been ignored, but I find it downright disgraceful and an insult to the people whom I represent. We have the worst broadband, the worst roads and possibly the worst sewerage infrastructure, all of which has a detrimental impact on the local economy and the opportunities available to us. The A4 upgrade and the Enniskillen bypass are not a magic bullet that will cure all the ills affecting Fermanagh. However, they would be a massive help and a significant boost to the area.

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council recently adopted a position calling for the upgrade of the A4 to dual carriageway. The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) has highlighted the socio-economic benefits of improvements to the A4-N16 transport corridor. Sinn Féin has campaigned on the issue for too many years to count. It is now time for the Minister to listen, if not to Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, ICBAN, me or my party, then, please, to Fermanagh's residents, businesses and its native sons and daughters who have to live in Belfast, Dublin, London and New York, to name a few, because of decades of underfunding of infrastructure.

**Mr Speaker:** Given the number who have asked to speak, we can say that Members will have up to eight minutes to speak.

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate. Like her, I was rather surprised by the statement coming out today, but, of course, I welcome the announcement contained in it, because the southern bypass needs to be pushed on and proceeded with.

It is a significant announcement for us in the south-west, and it has been long awaited by those who travel in the area for work or leisure and by the residents of that wonderful part of the world. I have been pursuing this project for most of my time as an MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Some 15 of the last 18 years have been spent pursuing it. Now that my time as an MLA is coming to an end, I am very pleased to see the project move ahead.

Anyone who is local to Fermanagh or who has driven into Enniskillen will understand how beneficial this piece of infrastructure will be. Congestion and gridlock have become commonplace in Enniskillen during busy periods. I am sure that Members who are not from Fermanagh will know that that is the case as they travel through. That congestion does not help our environment — I know that the Minister is very concerned about that part of her portfolio — or our economy. The new infrastructure is desperately needed. Uniquely among roads projects, it is welcomed by an overwhelming number of people in the area, with minimal objection to it. I have always found it difficult to understand why it could not proceed at a faster pace. However, it is proceeding now. I have been in touch with the Minister on a number of occasions, and we are due to meet again in early June.

We must keep pushing ahead towards the delivery of this project, and also that of the Sligo-Enniskillen greenway. I hope that it will link with the new piece of roads infrastructure. I will continue to support the greenway project after I leave office because, like the bypass, it will bring real and tangible benefits to Fermanagh and to the northern counties of the Republic of Ireland. I have supported for a number of years the idea of using the route of the former railway line from Enniskillen to Sligo to encourage citizens to enjoy the countryside while walking or cycling. The proposed Sligo-Enniskillen greenway connects the main greenway network in the Republic of Ireland with our growing greenway network in Northern Ireland. It also connects the Wild Atlantic Way with the Erne waterways. It will, no doubt, enhance our tourism offering in County Fermanagh. I am very passionate about that.

I am, and will remain, anxious to see Fermanagh, and tourism, prosper. Tourism is a great driver for prosperity in the county. The Minister will know that I mention the greenway because the last section of the greenway in Northern Ireland will end on that southern bypass. I hope, and ask the Minister to confirm, that she will take that into account in her design of the roadway and bridge over the River Erne so that cycle lanes and walkways are included in the new piece of infrastructure. We have waited on it for a very long time, but this is a good day and we should welcome it.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for securing this important and timely debate. Many of my colleagues in the west are delighted to see the progress on the Enniskillen bypass that the Minister has announced. This is a long-awaited project, and it will mean a lot to many people in the area that the SDLP has once again put the needs of local people, in Enniskillen and beyond, first. We should all commend the Minister for her focus and tireless work to make progress on these schemes, particularly at a time when she has been so busy restoring services across the North and building back better from COVID-19.

We in the SDLP went into government to play our part in delivering the change that our citizens deserve. True to her word, our Minister has stepped up with this project to tackle regional imbalance, improve the economy and better connect communities, while improving road safety.

After three years of no government and years of dither and delay from others, it is great to have a SDLP Minister who is prepared to work, deliver and get change done for our communities. I agree with the proposer of the topic, Ms Dolan, when she says that the people of Fermanagh have waited too long. That is strange, coming from a Member whose party colleagues held the post on at least two occasions in recent years but we did not see earlier progress. I look forward to the Member's support for our Minister asking the Finance Minister to speed up the implementation and delivery of the project.

#### 4.15 pm

I know that everyone will welcome the announcement that the Minister is not just delivering a road scheme but seeking to introduce measures to green our infrastructure in our towns when doing the big road schemes. Today's announcement that active travel measures will be introduced to Enniskillen town is much welcomed, and I know that those measures will be a huge benefit to the

local community, which can now look forward to a walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure that will bring health and well-being opportunities as well as better, cleaner, greener connectivity choices for citizens. Those are important measures, particularly given our debates today and yesterday on the challenge of the climate emergency.

Whilst I primarily want to congratulate the Minister, I also ask if she can provide further information on the active travel measures and if she foresees benefits for the local economy and tourism as well as for health and well-being; indeed, Mrs Foster referred to those. In thinking of those in my constituency and in other areas across the North who want to see more active, greener and cleaner infrastructure in our communities, will she further commit to more measures across Northern Ireland? I think in particular of the Ulster canal greenway project.

I thank the Minister for her time today, and I look forward to further information in her remarks. I also thank Ms Dolan for securing the debate.

**Mrs Barton:** Today's written ministerial statement on the Enniskillen southern bypass has maybe avoided some of the debate on that part of the discussion. I place on the record my welcome of today's announcement by the Minister for Infrastructure that the Department will now publish the formal environmental impact assessment notice to proceed and make the direction, vesting and bridge orders for the Enniskillen southern bypass scheme. Ulster Unionist Party representatives have long campaigned for that important scheme. Former Minister Danny Kennedy drove the project forward when he announced the preferred route almost 10 years ago. It is disappointing that it has taken so long to get to this stage.

When constructed, the Enniskillen southern bypass will provide major benefits by improving safety and journey times and for the strategic traffic that passes through the town. It will also provide significant traffic management and environmental improvements for Enniskillen town centre. It will be a significant investment and benefit for the area when it is eventually constructed. I trust that the Department is looking beyond this part of the process and setting a timescale for when the development on the ground can commence and for a completion date. Maybe the Minister can give us some indication of those timescales today.

We now join a long and historical list of politicians calling for work on the A4 upgrade, which is for the economic benefit of Fermanagh and the Clogher valley. It is vital that genuine plans are put in place to progress a scheme that upgrades the A4. I recall a document from 2010 from the Department for Regional Development, which is now, of course, the Department for Infrastructure, that was entitled the 'Regional Strategic Transport Network'. The plans in that included key strategic transport corridors, link corridors and the road element. One of the sections in it was a south-western corridor that included a three-and-a-half-kilometre, two-by-one bypass of Fivemiletown.

I am not sure what the community of Fivemiletown and the surrounding area thought of the plan at the time. The Department's investment delivery plan for roads estimated that the scheme in that south-western policy proposal would be delivered within the period from 2013 to 2018. Obviously, that did not happen. Indeed, I have never heard it mentioned since. I look forward to comments on that.

Fermanagh and Tyrone do not have any rail connections. Fermanagh does not have any motorways or dual carriageways. There are many strong and well-established businesses in Fermanagh. The infrastructure to and from the county is extremely poor. In order to provide help and support to the local economy, there is a genuine need to upgrade that transport infrastructure.

Some years ago, a cross-border group, which was facilitated by Fermanagh and Leitrim councils, looked at the A4/N16 Enniskillen to Sligo road upgrade. The feasibility study might even have been produced by that group. However, it did not seem to progress any further. Any support to improve the transport infrastructure in the south-west would be most welcome.

**Mr Gildernew:** I welcome the opportunity to discuss the A4 southern bypass. I thank my colleague Jemma Dolan for bringing the issue to the Floor. As she said, Sinn Féin has been campaigning for the delivery of the A4 southern bypass for years. I very much welcome Jemma's bringing a focus to it and the announcement from the Minister, notwithstanding the outstanding questions that Jemma has flagged in relation to that.

I would like to extend my sympathy to my constituency colleague Seán Lynch and the entire Lynch clan on the tragic loss of their brother Brendan.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Gildernew:** Yes.

**Mrs D Kelly:** My party wishes to be associated with the condolences to Mr Lynch and his family. I know that he lost his father last year as well. I am sure that it has been a terrible time, particularly with COVID and all the restrictions that that imposes on a family.

**Mr Gildernew:** Go raibh maith agat. I am sure that the family will welcome that.

The bypass scheme seeks to deliver a new road along the A4, from the Dublin Road to the Sligo Road. The benefits of the scheme include providing a strategic link for traffic to bypass Enniskillen town centre; reducing town centre congestion and enhancing the town centre environment; reduced noise and air pollution in Enniskillen town; improving the local economy; improved journey times; and improved road safety for all road users.

I join colleagues in reflecting on the fact that Fermanagh and South Tyrone has some of the most dynamic food-manufacturing and engineering companies in the North. We also have some of the best tourism offerings, yet we continue to suffer from underinvestment in infrastructure in our part of the world. As mentioned, there is no rail, and there is not a single mile of motorway in Fermanagh. Increasingly, there are gaps in broadband provision. All those elements are essential to our population's health and well-being, just as they are to populations elsewhere. We should accept and have nothing less than what is available elsewhere.

Currently, Enniskillen offers the only strategic east-west crossing between Upper Lough Erne and Lower Lough Erne. As such, the town suffers from the congestion caused by a combination of local and strategic road traffic. The existing road network has insufficient capacity for current levels of traffic. That results in unreliable journey times for all traffic, driver frustration and dissatisfaction

with the town centre environment. Therefore, the A4 Enniskillen bypass scheme seeks to provide a new link for traffic between the A4 Dublin Road and the A4 Sligo Road. It is widely supported by the local population. By tackling the bottleneck on that section of road, the upgrade would allow businesses to benefit from improved access to their shops and enjoy the improved journey times that would come with that. In fact, it has been estimated that the scheme would improve average journey times by around 50% and take 40% of the traffic on the A4 out of Enniskillen town centre.

The total cost of the bypass scheme is estimated to be in the region of £25 million to £30 million.

I welcome that investment. I also endorse the views of my colleague Jemma Dolan and others that we absolutely need those schemes to be prioritised and progressed. Schemes like those, along with the A5 and others, are crucial to ensuring that our region is sustainable and served on an equal basis as everywhere else.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Minister. Minister, if you wish, you can have over half an hour. *[Laughter.]* For some reason, all the same, I do not think that you will need to take that.

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. First, I offer my condolences to the Lynch family at this difficult time. I thank Ms Dolan for securing the Adjournment debate on the Enniskillen bypass and the A4, and I thank all Members who were present for the debate.

As Members will be aware, today I announced my intention to proceed with the Enniskillen southern bypass scheme and to make the statutory orders. In line with advice, I made that announcement through a written ministerial statement and a subsequent press release to make sure that Members across the House were given prior notice of my decision.

Since being appointed as Minister, I have made it clear that my focus is on doing what I can to improve the lives of people in Northern Ireland. I have made clear my commitment to tackling regional imbalance, improving the economy, job prospects and prosperity, connecting communities and improving road safety. I share the frustrations that have been expressed by Ms Dolan and others. It has taken too long. I also agree with the analysis that there has been historical underinvestment in that part of the North and that much more should have been done. This is the first time that the SDLP has held the Infrastructure portfolio, and it is committed to doing everything that it can to deliver for people who live across the North, particularly in those areas that have been left behind.

I listened with interest to Members' comments and the issues that they raised. From my engagement with businesses and the local community in Fermanagh, it is clear that the delivery of the Enniskillen southern bypass project and the need to consider upgrades to the A4 route is of huge importance to the region, as it is for me, as the Minister for Infrastructure. I am, therefore, pleased that the developmental phase of the project has been completed with my announcement today.

Ms Dolan asked questions about the time frame for the completion of the statutory orders. My officials are working at pace to ensure that all the work that is required on due

diligence is completed. However, we can now proceed to enabling works, which will allow us to move to the procurement and construction phases. I will continue to engage with the Finance Minister and my Executive colleagues to maximise the funding that I can secure to ensure that we can deliver this important project in the quickest possible time frame.

I acutely recognise that the scheme is significant to the town of Enniskillen and the surrounding area. Indeed, I am aware that the scheme is being considered for inclusion in the Mid South West growth deal. The proposed Enniskillen southern bypass is 2.1 kilometres in length, with additional tie-ins to the existing road network at the A4 Dublin Road and the A509 Derrylin Road by way of two new at-grade roundabouts. To complement the bypass, active travel provision has also been incorporated into the design, and I asked my officials to ensure that we maximise the opportunities for active travel along the bypass route and, importantly, in Enniskillen town centre.

The scheme will provide a new transport link to the southern side of the town, improving the connection between the A4 Dublin Road and the A4 Sligo Road, and offer a number of benefits that Members have rightly identified. It will reduce traffic congestion in Enniskillen; provide a new transport link along the A4 from the Dublin Road to the Sligo Road; facilitate a more efficient movement of traffic in and around Enniskillen; reduce noise and air pollution in the town; and provide further opportunities to improve active travel and people-centred place-shaping in the town centre for those who want to walk, wheel and cycle to work and for leisure purposes.

It would be helpful to remind the House of the statutory procedures governing major road schemes such as the Enniskillen southern bypass, which are set out in the Roads Order 1993. The order enables the three strands of the statutory procedures — the environmental assessment, the direction order and the vesting order — to be taken forward concurrently and to be published in the public domain at the same time.

#### 4.30 pm

Following the public consultation on the draft orders between April and May 2018, my Department decided to progress the scheme without the need for a public inquiry, because it was widely recognised that there was general support for the scheme and wide recognition of the benefits that it would deliver.

I hope that Members will appreciate that the Department must follow due process with diligence and that it takes time to progress a scheme such as this through the statutory processes.

Ms Dolan, Mrs Barton and others raised the issue of upgrades to the A4. I fully appreciate the strategic importance of the A4 and its function as a part of the south-western key transport corridor. My officials are preparing a new suite of transport plans, and the first in line for completion is the regional strategic transport network transport plan. The transport plan will set out future investment and improvement for our strategic transport networks by road, rail and bus to 2035, and it will reflect my ongoing commitment to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities right across the North. The plan will help inform my priorities

for future development of the main road networks, including the A4, and I expect to publish the draft plan for consultation towards the end of this year. Views from key stakeholders and members of the public on the upgrades to the A4 key transport corridor will be most welcome.

I must also point out that my Department has put significant investment into the A4 over recent years in the form of resurfacing and improvement schemes. Over £2 million has been spent in the past three years. There are also plans to undertake further resurfacing work, and we are looking at the potential of providing cycleways adjacent to the A4 from Maguiresbridge to Brookeborough and from Clogher to Augher.

I will turn now to some specific points that Members raised that I have not so far addressed. As I said, I agree with the frustrations being expressed by Ms Dolan. I agree with her that it is a disgrace that people in Fermanagh have been left like this for so long. The challenge to be met is what we will do now to turn the situation around and deliver the change that those communities deserve.

I welcome the fact that Mrs Foster positively received the statement today, and I know that she is among Members across the House who have been campaigning for some time. I agree with her that this is a good day. I also agree with her that the new infrastructure will deliver economic benefits and critically important environmental benefits. I believe that the bypass but also the transformation that we can ensure takes place in Enniskillen town centre will act as a catalyst for the growth of local indigenous tourism, which is really important, not least in our recovery from COVID.

Mrs Foster also referenced the Enniskillen to Sligo greenway. I reassure her and Members across the House of my commitment to the development of that greenway, and greenways right across the North, and that is why I established the new £20 million blue-green fund. Mrs Foster was my accompanying Minister at the most recent North/South Ministerial Council transport sector meeting, at which Minister Ryan and I discussed that particular greenway and committed to ensuring that we work with each other, that our officials work together and that my officials continue to work with local councils to ensure that we get the schemes progressed to delivery. I also agree on the need to ensure connectivity for our greenway network right across the island.

Mrs Kelly spoke about the importance of the project in tackling regional imbalance, and I wholeheartedly agree. She spoke about the importance of meeting the needs of local people. That is what we are here to do. She also talked about the positive changes and benefits that will be delivered by enhancing Enniskillen town centre. I agree with her that that is very important for our green recovery from COVID. We should be doing what we can to improve road safety, to improve our air quality and to ensure that more of our citizens have safe choices for engaging in active travel.

She asked about the work that I intend to take forward in other constituencies, and I can assure her that, while I am finalising my budget for this financial year, I remain very much committed to doing what I can to enhance our blue-green infrastructure. I know that there are many opportunities for us to do that in her constituency, so I look forward to working with her and local councils.



Mrs Barton talked about the importance of having the debate today, and I know that she has campaigned long and hard, as have others, for this piece of infrastructure. I agree with her that we need to take a holistic look at the transport opportunities and at the connectivity for that part of Northern Ireland. She will be aware that, together with Minister Eamon Ryan in the South, I have announced a new all-island strategic rail review, which is the first of its kind. It will look at where we can improve existing rail networks but also at providing new opportunities for rail connectivity. I am mindful that, in her constituency, there are huge gaps that we need to try to address, and I encourage her to feed into the consultation later this year on the road, rail and bus opportunities and connectivity.

Mr Gildernew talked about the multiple benefits to be derived from this piece of infrastructure, including enhanced journey times and road safety improvements. He also referenced the air quality improvements that will come from it.

I reiterate my appreciation to Ms Dolan for bringing the Adjournment topic to the House and to all Members for their contributions. I was pleased to make the decision to proceed with the scheme and notify all Members of it today. This is an important day for the people of Fermanagh and all those elected to represent them. It is a key step in the development of this significant scheme, which seeks, as Members have said, to reduce traffic congestion for strategic and local road users in Enniskillen town centre.

I am very aware of how important the A4 Enniskillen southern bypass will be for the many people and businesses who have expressed their support for it, and I am committed to doing all that I can to deliver the scheme. I will work with the Finance Minister and my Executive colleagues to secure the necessary funding as quickly as possible so that we can deliver the project and improve road safety, journey times, air quality and noise levels and provide active travel opportunities. We now have the potential to reshape Enniskillen town centre to create a sustainable, liveable place where people have the space to stay, meet, shop and walk and cycle safely.

*Adjourned at 4.36 pm.*



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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 17 May 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Matters of the Day

### Inquest into the Ballymurphy Massacre

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Pat Sheehan has been given leave to make a statement on the Ballymurphy inquest, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should do so by rising in their place and continuing to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

**Mr Sheehan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I grew up just a few hundred yards from Ballymurphy, where those killings took place. I have worked for the last number of years with relatives of the victims to support them and to try to get to where they got to last week. Going back to 9, 10 and 11 August 1971, strangers came into the Ballymurphy area, supposedly a crack regiment from the British Army. They were there, ostensibly, to take people from their homes and throw them into prison and internment camps without any due process. In fact, most of those people were not, in any way, connected with the IRA.

Over three days, that crack regiment of the British Army systematically swept through the Ballymurphy area and killed 11 citizens. The British Army and British Government set about blaming the victims, claiming that those who were killed were gunmen and a gunman. There was no proper investigation carried out: in fact, the coroner, Justice Keegan, said that the lack of investigation in some of the cases was shocking. The British Army took the lives of innocent civilians. They cared nothing for their families and the hardships that they faced afterwards. They took the truth from them, they denigrated the dead, and they offered only lies and deceit. They left the families with nothing — or so they thought.

What they had not factored in was the determination of the families of the victims, their tenacity, stamina and integrity and their unwavering commitment to clear the names of their loved ones. Last Tuesday, the world heard what the families have always known.

Justice Keegan read out the names in court: Father Hugh Mullan; Frank Quinn; Daniel Teggart; Joan Connolly; Noel Phillips; Joseph Murphy; John Laverty; Joseph Corr; Edward Doherty; and John McKerr. She said that they were entirely innocent of any wrongdoing. The British Government now need to resolve that situation and give justice to those families, who have been wronged for 50 years.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Member for bringing the matter to the House. “Unarmed” and “innocent”: that is how, at last week’s inquest, Justice Keegan described the Ballymurphy victims gunned down in cold blood 50 years ago. That is despite the barrage of abuse and propaganda that tried to misrepresent and falsify who those people in Ballymurphy were and what they were doing in August 1971 and despite the actions of the British media, Government and state representatives to project those people as gunmen and gunwomen. They were not, and that is what Justice Keegan clearly articulated last week. No ifs, no buts and no whataboutery can alter that fact.

The Ballymurphy families have shown courage, bravery, grit and determination in the face of the huge obstacles and adversity placed in front of them. However, the same cannot be said of Boris Johnson or his ministerial colleagues, who went into hiding last week and treated the families with utter contempt. At first, there was no apology; then one was eventually issued in secret. There was no attempt to empathise or sympathise with the families. Despite his pronouncements, Boris and the Tories do not give a damn about truth, justice or reconciliation. The campaign for an amnesty that he is pursuing is about shutting the door in the face of families who want truth and justice. It is not necessarily about protecting the soldiers who fired the shots on the day in August 1971; Boris Johnson wants to cover for those at the very top who directed soldiers in the North during the Troubles, including people like General Mike Jackson, who was there on the ground directing soldiers in Ballymurphy in 1971 and at Bloody Sunday in Derry six months later.

When the state murders its citizens, it is in the interests of all people and all communities to seek truth and justice. We say that the British state should be on trial for what it did in Ballymurphy and that those who were culpable in that massacre — the soldiers, the generals and the politicians at the very top — should go on trial in court and be locked up for what they did. What happened in Ballymurphy revealed to the eyes of the world the rotten role of British imperialism in Ireland. It was imperialism in the form of internment without trial, torture, state collusion with loyalist paramilitaries, shoot to kill and, ultimately, the murder of innocent people, and that was how the British state responded to basic demands for civil rights and democracy. In that month, the British Army left 54 people in Ballymurphy without a parent. Some were evacuated to the South and put into refugee camps, and others were taunted by the military after having their families brutalised. Those families deserve truth and justice, and, while Boris does not want to see that enacted, we need to press to make sure that it happens.

**Mr Givan:** The families of Ballymurphy have received the verdict that they wanted to receive: “innocent”. The tragedy of what happened to them is something that all of us feel deeply from whatever section of the community we come. The apology has not been well managed at all, and there has, rightly, been criticism of the Prime Minister for that. I hope that that can be put right so that the issue can be put to rest.

Let us not, however, use what happened in Ballymurphy as a platform to attack the British Army for its role during the conflict that took place. It is right that, where criticism is justified and there are findings, people are rightly held to account. When we look back at the conflict that took place, we see that those British soldiers were here to deal with the armed conflict and the terrorist war being waged by the Provisional IRA. The IRA is responsible for the murder and maiming of hundreds and thousands of people. British soldiers did not come here with the intent of killing anybody; they came here to defend basic freedoms and democracy. Where is the apology, the truth and the justice for the hundreds and thousands of victims of terrorist organisations? When will they get that? When will they hear an apology?

As we deal with the legacy and the past, let us all be fully aware of the hurt and the pain that exist on all sides.

Let us not go into the future waging a war based on the past; let us make sure that we never go back to what happened. Let us try to build a better place and a better future for the next generation and all of our people.

**Ms Mallon:** On behalf of the SDLP, first and foremost, I pay tribute to the Ballymurphy families, who have been tireless in their fight for truth and justice and in the face of deliberate attempts to blacken the names of their loved ones, deliberate attempts to deny the truth and deliberate attempts to rewrite the past. The Ballymurphy inquest vindicated the Ballymurphy families and their loved ones. They were innocent — all innocent.

The inquest was clear. The murder of innocent people in Ballymurphy 50 years ago was shrouded in “basic inhumanity”. Inhumanity: that is a damning indictment of the British state. It is shameful that the British establishment forced innocent people to fight for truth and justice for so long. It is shameful that the British Government today continue to fail to account publicly for the injustice. It is shameful that the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, cannot even apologise up front and publicly.

Victims across our society have been consistently failed and re-traumatised, and the House should unite today to send an unequivocal message that no victims, whether of state or paramilitary violence, should ever be obstructed in accessing truth and justice. All of us should resolve that the Prime Minister must today come out of hiding, come out from behind closed doors and give a public apology to the families in Ballymurphy. Instead of trying to sweep the truth under the carpet, the Prime Minister’s efforts, along with all of us, would be better focused on once and for all dealing with legacy and dealing with our past in an open way.

Like many others, I have been struck and moved by the immense dignity and respect shown by the Ballymurphy families to all victims of our past, and we would all do well

to follow their lead so that the deep, painful wounds of all victims are given a chance to heal.

**Mr Beattie:** In 1971, 180 of our citizens were murdered as part of the Troubles. The year after that, nearly 500 were murdered, and many more thousands were injured. Northern Ireland was on fire. Sectarianism was taking hold. Three-way gun battles took place virtually every day. We were descending into chaos. Some people will paint themselves into a corner and will never criticise anybody whom they deem to be on their side. Let me be clear: as an ex-soldier, I will criticise anybody when I think that they are wrong. What happened at Ballymurphy over those three days was wrong, and, because of what happened, 10 people — nine men and one woman — who had aspirations for the future and had families to be with and loved ones to share a life with were killed. They were totally and absolutely innocent, and they should not have been killed.

My thoughts today are with their family members as they think back to the times that they could have had with the loved ones who were killed over those three days. I commend them for seeking justice. Everybody deserves truth and justice, even when the truth and justice are hard to hear. For 50 years, that is what the Ballymurphy families strove for. I met them a number of years ago. It is the only time that I met the families. They gave me their testimony, which was harrowing back then and has been confirmed by the coroner.

We must take notice of that. It is a plea to everybody: do not say, “They are on my side, and I can justify what they did”, when you cannot. We should look at what is happening and what has happened in our past and work for reconciliation. Part of that is to give a simple impact statement: “What we did on that day was wrong. What happened to those families in Ballymurphy over those three days in 1971 was wrong”. I commend the families in seeking justice.

#### 12.15 pm

**Ms Armstrong:** On behalf of the Alliance Party, I join others in recognising how the Ballymurphy families pursued their long and tortuous path to seeking justice with immense courage and dignity.

While truth cannot bring back loved ones who were lost, the families have received complete and utter vindication. Not only were the victims completely innocent and the use of force utterly without justification but the families had to put up with the libel that the victims were IRA gunmen. Even in the most challenging of circumstances in 1971, these deaths should never have occurred.

The Ballymurphy massacre had wider repercussions for the UK Government and their predecessors, both in how the massacre was able to take place and how it was handled afterwards. However, in the immediate aftermath of the inquest findings, the UK Government needed to give an unqualified and comprehensive apology to the families. The manner in which that was handled last week was not only clumsy but offensive. In the aftermath of the Bloody Sunday inquiry, there is a clear model in the way in which the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, gave such an apology. It was almost as though the current Prime Minister did not want to be bothered and was just going through the motions.

The Matter of the Day is rightly around the Ballymurphy families. However, in recognising them, we need to recognise the many thousands of other families across Northern Ireland and further afield who still wait for their justice and truth.

There will be other occasions on which to debate what the Government are doing around legacy and what should happen now. However, it is worth noting that what is now in train does not have the support of the Ballymurphy families, other victims' groups, most of the political parties or many veterans.

The approach of the Government appears to be framed through the lens of addressing the false narrative of vexatious investigations and then bolting on whatever else it takes to get there, rather than taking a holistic approach to maximising truth and justice. We already have a legacy process agreed by the UK and Irish Governments and most of the Northern Ireland political parties in the Stormont House Agreement of 2014. Although far from perfect, it has the potential to deliver outcomes in truth and justice. As recently as January 2020, with New Decade, New Approach, there was a commitment from the Government to the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement.

Today, I pay my respects to Patsy, Geraldine and the Mullan family, from Portaferry and beyond, and to all the families, whose names were read out by Mr Sheehan. Those families have been through hell.

**Miss Woods:** I will not speak for long as much of what needs to be said has been said already. This is rightly about the Ballymurphy families. The verdict of the coroner affirmed what the families of those killed in Ballymurphy in 1971 have always known: their loved ones were entirely innocent. It is shameful that it has taken 50 years for official recognition of the killing of these 10 people. The families have lived through the past 50 years with the heavy toll of injustice that was visited upon them, and they have not given up.

I hope that the coroner's verdict comes as a degree of comfort after decades of distress and compounded grief, but it is nowhere near enough. I pay tribute to the fortitude of the Ballymurphy families and the grace and dignity that they have shown during this very difficult and protracted inquest process.

**Mr Allister:** The sheer tenacity of the Ballymurphy families brought them to the point at which they had recourse to due process. As a group, they obtained the verdict that their loved ones were innocent. It behoves us all to accept the verdict, and it was a long time in coming. Of course, the manner of their dying will remain a very heavy burden for many.

It would be wrong, however, not to note the very tumultuous circumstances in which all of that happened. Although much has been said of an adverse nature about the security forces, the reality is that, in so many instances, they stood between this community and the horrendous death and destruction that was intended by the terrorists. Bombers who went out to bomb and murderers who went out to murder chose to be terrorists. No one who joined the security forces chose to be a murderer, yet terrible things happened, and, when they happen, they leave a desperate scar on society.

That scar also plays up to what many other innocent victims have never had recourse. They have never had due process. The victims of La Mon, Teebane and Kingsmills never had public inquiries or fulsome inquests. They certainly never had trials. They too need to be remembered, as does the pain and hurt that they continue to bear, with little sign that anyone will bring respite to them.

Undoubtedly, things happened in the past that were wrong in every way, but that is not an excuse for those who brought this Province to that point of uprising and tumult —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Allister:** — to rewrite the history that is the truth of the past.

**Mr Sheehan:** Weasel words.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you.

**Mr Sheehan:** Weasel words.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. Order, please. That concludes that item of business.

## Breaches of International Law in Palestine by Israel

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Emma Sheerin has been given leave to make a statement on breaches of international law in Palestine by Israel, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject.

**Ms Sheerin:** Mr Speaker, you set out how this Matter of the Day meets the criteria. To satisfy the criteria, it must meet two requirements: it must be a matter of exceptional public interest and it must affect the people of the North. I do not know how anybody could watch the events that we see unfolding in Palestine at the minute without feeling affected. As inhabitants of the world and members of the human race, an injustice against any of us is an injustice against us all. That is what is happening.

A few weeks ago, I sat in the Chamber in complete disbelief as Sinn Féin and Gerry Carroll were the only Members not to support the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of “antisemitism”, which says that it is antisemitic to criticise the Israeli state. It is not antisemitic to criticise the ongoing Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which is in contravention of the Geneva Convention. Those people have to acquire a permit to move around their own homeland and are denied access to basic utilities. The most recent violence erupted following further forced evictions in east Jerusalem. Missiles were fired on a mosque as people were inside. It is ethnic cleansing.

Reports tell us that almost 220 people have been killed over the past week, 209 of whom were Palestinians. The Gaza Strip is smaller than County Louth; 58 children have been murdered there this week, 40,000 people have been displaced from their homes and a building housing international media has been bombed into extinction. Members around the Chamber have just talked about the victims of the Ballymurphy massacre and the long fight for the truth. We, in the North of Ireland, know what colonialism does to people and what human rights abuses do to communities, but you do not have to know that to know right from wrong. We all must stand against the war crimes of the Israeli state.

**Mr Humphrey:** I rise on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party to condemn the violence in the Middle East. Both sides need to draw back. The international envoys that have been charged and tasked with that highly important and significant role need to be on the ground listening to the views of both the Israeli Government and people and the Palestinians. There needs to be a process of meaningful dialogue.

In the debate in the House two weeks ago, I said that Northern Ireland politicians need to be very careful about the language that they use about the Middle East. Sadly, the words and actions of some Northern Ireland politicians over the last few days have inflamed the situation, and I will come to that later in my contribution.

The first duty of any Government is to protect their people. We, in Northern Ireland, know only too well what happens when a Government fail to protect their people here and on

the mainland. Attacking civilians, civilian installations and targets is wrong no matter who the perpetrator is. There are appalling scenes on both sides not least the attack on the Magen David Adom (MDA) ambulance service and its personnel over the last number of days. That is simply wrong.

Hamas terrorists need to stop using innocent people as shields, which is something that has been going on for some time. I do not say that out of ignorance. With my colleague Mr Buckley and some other colleagues from the House and Westminster, I visited Israel in 2018. We visited Ramallah and spoke at first hand to representatives of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian people in Gaza are absolutely terrorised by Hamas, an organisation that will not allow elections to take place. When was the last time that there were democratic elections in the West Bank or Gaza?

The violence must end. Does the House know that Hamas means violence in Hebrew? As I said, Hamas terrorised the Muslim Palestinian population. They are radical Islamic terrorists. Its leaders call for the destruction of Israel and the killing of Jews. Of course, it wants the destruction of the state of Israel from the mountains of Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea.

As I said earlier in my contribution, we need to be careful about the language that we use. Statements and images over the last number of days here have led to Jewish-owned businesses in Belfast and Londonderry being attacked over the weekend: that is simply unacceptable. Our small Jewish community in Northern Ireland is very fearful. They are citizens of Northern Ireland; they are not spokesmen or representatives of the Israeli Government any more than — I said it in the House a few weeks ago —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Humphrey:** — the average American is of an American Administration. I condemn the violence, and I support our Jewish community in this city.

**Mr O'Toole:** First, I welcome the fact that this Matter of Day was proposed and accepted. The images on our screens from Gaza in recent days have been nothing short of horrifying. I send my solidarity and that of my party to those experiencing violence in Gaza.

### 12.30 pm

In relation to the situation in the Middle East, it is worth saying that there is a deep asymmetry between the state of Israel — particularly the state of Israel led by the Government of Benjamin Netanyahu — and the Palestinian people who live in appalling conditions in Gaza. Gaza has 2 million people living in an area that is not much bigger than the Ards peninsula. They have poor medical care and are deprived of much basic infrastructure. While there can be no justification for the actions of Hamas and the firing of rockets — that is unacceptable and not a way to get justice or resolution for the Palestinian people — it is true to say that the actions and conduct of the Government of Benjamin Netanyahu have been not only irresponsible but unacceptable.

What we need to see is, first, a de-escalation, and, secondly, after more than a decade in government, Benjamin Netanyahu and his Government returning to the table and getting serious about a deal that secures peace,

justice and security for all communities in the Middle East. That will mean a return to the borders of 1967, as set out in international law and UN treaties and resolutions. That should happen forthwith. Sadly, given the record of Mr Netanyahu, I am not convinced that that is on his agenda. Therefore, while it is important that we condemn rockets being fired into Israel and that we offer condolences and solidarity to people who are experiencing that violence, we cannot turn a blind eye to the extraordinary violence that is being meted out to innocent people in Gaza. We know that around 200 people, half of them women and children, have been killed in recent days. We cannot simply turn a blind eye to that and ignore it. My thoughts and solidarity are with all of those people.

We need the international community and those with power in the international community to de-escalate the situation and to finally deliver justice and a peaceful settlement. In closing, I say this to those who are protesting, legitimately, here: continue to protest legitimately and make your voices clear, but it is absolutely unacceptable that any violence or —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr O'Toole:** — graffiti should be targeted at members of our Jewish community. That is absolutely wrong.

**Dr Aiken:** When we rise for this matter, we should be condemning all violence. In matters of international law, it should be clear that firing rockets against civilian targets undermines the Geneva and Hague conventions. That is clear. There should be no violence on any side.

The issue in the Middle East is much deeper. When we in the Northern Ireland Assembly debate this, there are issues that we should be taking to the forefront. The first issue is the degree of antisemitism that has been shown in Northern Ireland. That should not be happening. We should be condemning it completely. At the weekend, we saw disgraceful scenes in London of people going through the streets of an area that is predominantly occupied by people from the Jewish community. Can you imagine what would have happened if that had happened in areas occupied by the Irish community, and people had been using similar language about Irish people, or if it had happened in a Muslim community? It is completely unacceptable. I notice that Members across the Chamber seem to think that there is some kind of amusement about this. There is no amusement about this. Antisemitism must be completely pushed away. We should not have it in our society, under any circumstances.

However, there is a further issue. We should be critical and clear about Hamas and the role that it has had. Each rocket fired by Hamas probably costs about \$200 to \$300, or even several thousand dollars. That is money that should be going to support medicines and economic development in the Gaza Strip, but none of that is happening. Instead, they are using that money to buy rockets that they fire at civilian targets. How can that be acceptable? It is strange that the Members opposite — I say this to them quite clearly — are not talking about this issue with a recognition of what is happening in the rest of the Middle East. They will be fully aware that Hamas is supported by Iran. They will also be aware that the United States is involved, currently, in a conflict with Iran, particularly in the high seas and the seas around the Strait

of Hormuz, and is stopping significant amounts of arms going to Yemen. This is all part of a wider situation.

We should stop focussing on one area and realise the entire disaster that is happening across the Middle East — in Yemen, Iraq and Syria — and what Hezbollah and Hamas are doing. These are things that we need to concentrate on. The lesson that we should take and pass on to the people of the Middle East is that violence does not work. It has not worked here, and it will not work in the Middle East. It is time for all sides to stop.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I thank Ms Sheerin for tabling this Matter of the Day. I will start by sending my deep sympathy to all the families of those who have lost lives in the past two weeks. Accountability for the needless deaths and destruction over the last few weeks lies squarely with the Israeli Government. It goes without saying, but I will underline that the Israeli Government do not reflect the views, values and actions of all people living in Israel and certainly not all of the Jewish people, just as Hamas does not speak for all Palestinians. I echo the comments from other Members in the condemnation of attacks on the Jewish people living in Northern Ireland.

The current Government of Israel have intentionally accelerated the illegal occupation of Palestinian territory, cited hatred against Palestinians and normalised settler violence. They have set the context for the current crisis. Occupying and destroying Palestinian land is illegal and abhorrent. The Israeli Government know this well, yet persist. We are witnessing, from the Israeli Government, a form of ethnic cleansing, enabled by discriminatory Israeli law that should never have been introduced. The escalation of violence is a direct result of those actions, and the extent of the violence is unspeakable and unjustifiable. I reject arguments of self-defence, that air raids are OK because advance warnings and alarms are given, and that the killing of innocent children is justified due to Hamas using civilians as human shields. There is no justification for the horror inflicted on Palestinians by the Israeli Government.

I condemn rocket fire and mortars from Hamas and other groups into Israeli civilian areas. That constitutes a war crime. We must be clear, however, that there is no equivalence between this violence and that of an incredibly powerful occupying state. The Israeli Government are carrying out ethnic cleansing and collective punishment against an already oppressed people. This violence must come to an end, and Israel must lead on ending it. Genuine peace can only be achieved with the full realisation of Palestinian rights and the end of Israel's systemic discrimination against Palestinians in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory.

I call for an end to the illegal occupation and illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip. I call for a re-energised peace process to create a sustainable two-state outcome that is consistent with democracy, human rights and international law.

**Miss Woods:** I too thank Emma Sheerin for tabling this Matter of the Day. We have witnessed devastating events in occupied Palestine and Israel. The heavy bombing of Gaza continued last night as the fighting now enters its second week. More than 50 children have been killed, and the death toll sits at nearly 200. Every effort must be made to end all attacks and forms of aggression, address

the underlying causes and hold those responsible fully accountable. De-escalation and a route to peace can only be achieved with the full realisation of Palestinian rights and the end of Israel's systematic discrimination against Palestinians in Israel and occupied Palestine.

In addition to procuring an end to bombing, rocketing and violence, it is time for the international community to play an actual meaningful role and step up to events in Israel and Palestine. Words are fine, but making public statements without action is meaningless. This is not the first escalation of tension and violence. It is not the first time we have witnessed the senseless and horrific murder of people. The violence is following patterns that we have seen before, reminiscent of the horrific hostilities in 2008, 2012 and 2014.

There must be full compliance with international law and a genuine peace process, otherwise people will continue to suffer while the international community's attention is elsewhere. There must be negotiations that can resolve the conflict that are based on international law, justice and the end of discrimination. Those are the only realistic building blocks for a secure and lasting peace. The violence cannot and must not continue.

**Mr Allister:** As a small state, Northern Ireland knows what it is like to be subjected to perpetual terrorist attacks over many years. When I listen to the debate, I wonder what people expect Israel to do when it is subjected to 3,000 rocket attacks. What is Israel meant to do? Sit back and take it? Thankfully, it has good defences, which have neutralised many of those rockets and their murderous intent. Any sovereign state has an absolute right to defend itself when it is subject to attack like that, and therein is the — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order, Members. Sorry, Mr Allister.

We have almost come through the second of the two Matters of the Day, which are very challenging issues for many across the House, and, up to this point, they have been dealt with very respectfully. People have made their contributions and have been able to adhere to being respectful, robustly saying what they want and need to say. They have done so in a respectful way that has elicited responses rather than abuse. Can we keep in that vein? These matters are very important, and we should not do anything to inflame problems outside the House. I ask Members to stick, in a respectful manner, to the items on the agenda. Thank you.

**Mr Allister:** I trust that I was doing that, Mr Speaker.

The point that I am making is that, when a sovereign state is subjected to a relentless terrorist attack, it has a duty to its citizens to defend itself.

I note that, when she was making her opening remarks on the topic, the Member who brought it to the House did not have one word of criticism about the firing of 3,000 rockets and more by Hamas. We were told about the poverty of Gaza, which cannot be gainsaid, but Hamas authorities obviously prioritise the acquisition of thousands of rockets over dealing with the socio-economic issues in that area. Instead of investing in those issues, they would rather invest in rockets. Let us get real about the situation. In my book, a sovereign state like Israel has every necessity to defend itself when terrorism is brought to its territory by

rocket attack. The way to end that is for Hamas to stop its aggression.

**Mr Carroll:** What has happened over the last week in particular is disgraceful and has shown the world what the Israeli state represents and what it is all about. This past weekend, al-Nakba was commemorated by Palestinians. That was 73 years ago. They refer to it as the catastrophe, and it was the founding of the Israeli state. That state was built on settler colonialism, ethnic cleansing, forced displacement and violence to name but a few of its issues. It now practises apartheid. Israel is an apartheid state. It is not just a bad state or a state that does bad things: it is an apartheid state. That is the view not just of me or my party but a view that has been declared by Desmond Tutu, Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem and many more organisations.

Today there has been an attempt by some of those opposite, the mainstream media and many others to make this a two-sided debate. Let us be clear that this is not an equal battle. Home-made rockets are no match for F-16 jet fighters. Israelis can seek shelter, but Palestinians have absolutely nowhere to hide. Israeli settlers have the best infrastructure in the region, and they have a nuclear state. Palestinians are subjected to absolute poverty and misery as a result of what Israel is doing.

**12.45 pm**

It is shameful that the Member for North Belfast tries to insinuate, as he has done before, that Palestinian protests in Belfast have led to an increase in antisemitic attacks. It is deplorable, inaccurate and very, very dangerous, and he has no evidence of it whatsoever. People across the world, including Muslim people, Jewish people, Christian people, secular people and many others, are standing against Israel because it is an occupier, an aggressor and an apartheid state. So many are angry because of what Israel is doing.

The Members opposite who expressed faux concern about Hamas and its role in the oppression of Palestinians should open their eyes. Look at the slaughter being carried out by Israel. Look at the occupation. Look at the checkpoints. Open your eyes.

Solidarity to the Palestinians. In our thousands and in our millions, we are all Palestinians. Victory to the intifada. Expel the Israeli ambassador from Ireland.

**Mr Buckley:** I am glad to speak in the House after the previous contribution from People Before Profit.

I deplore the loss of all innocent life, at home and abroad, but there has been a significant lack of balance during this item of business. I have seen, on recent visits to Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the horror of the situation faced by both sides. The living conditions of many innocent Israeli civilians, including children and women, along that border have not been mentioned. They have to live within a minute of a bomb shelter because of indiscriminate missile attacks from Hamas. I have seen the terror tunnels that Hamas ruthlessly uses to cross to take innocent Israelis to their death in extreme circumstances. I have seen them, and there needs to be recognition that this is a difficult situation. From many on the Benches opposite, however, there is constant condemnation of the Israeli state and denial of its right to existence, but surely an apt starting



point is for them to realise the situation in which those people live.

I hope that, in the days to come, there can be intense dialogue leading to a peaceful resolution in the Middle East, but that starts with a simple recognition of the state of Israel's right to existence. In the days ahead, there will be international condemnation of the events in the Middle East, but, as Mr Aiken rightly pointed out, focusing solely on what is happening in Israel and in Palestine does not give this debate and this serious issue due consideration. There is much to consider, and the international community has a vital role to play in that.

Mr Humphrey rightly put on record the dangers of rhetoric in the House, and we heard it from Gerry Carroll of People Before Profit just a moment ago. The small Jewish community in Northern Ireland feels vulnerable right now. Graves have been attacked, their businesses have been disrupted, and they have received threatening messages. It is time that we put our arms around our Jewish community in Northern Ireland, which has lived peacefully in this country for many years and plays a vital role in its vibrancy, particularly in Belfast. I hope that, in the days to come, Members will reflect on that and that we, as a place that has suffered in the past, can help the state of Israel and the people of Palestine in the future.

**Mr McGrath:** I welcome this Matter of the Day. The Israeli military launched another series of air raids on the Gaza Strip early this morning, only hours after Israel's caretaker Prime Minister said that the attacks on the Palestinian area would continue. I welcome, too, the fact that this Matter of the Day is about breaches of international law in Palestine by Israel, so we are debating the topic. The fact that some have stated that the murder of 58 children is in some way acceptable as a means of defence absolutely sickens me to my core. It absolutely sickens me that somebody could stand in this place and say that there is any justification for the murder of 58 children.

Up to 198 people have been killed in the past week. There is a view that the violence will be allowed to continue until the death toll is too high, at which point, and only then, the international community will get involved and say, "Enough is enough".

Kofi Annan once said:

*"A genocide begins with the killing of one man — not for what he has done, but because of who he is."*

Genocide begins with the denial of a person's very humanity. What is happening in Palestine is a genocide. If we stand by and do not condemn this action totally and unequivocally, it begs the question as to what the House will stand for. The message that comes out of the House today must be that we are united and unequivocal in saying, "Enough is enough". There can be no more loss of life or children murdered or their deaths justified. Sometimes, it is not enough to stand in solidarity. The current death and destruction call for action. The genocide must stop, and the international community must condemn it and seek a peaceful resolution in which no more families or children in Palestine will go to sleep with the fear that they will never wake up.

**Mr McCrossan:** I add my voice to those of other Members on this side of the House, and I show my solidarity to the

people of Palestine and those being bombed to death in Gaza.

I often think that not much more can shock me. However, it is dreadful to stand here today and witness a despicable debate of "go compare", when 58 children have been bombed and blown to pieces in their own communities and are under threat from a state that has occupied their land, deprived them of basic utilities and left them in poverty.

Some Members defend that action because it is the state's right to defend itself. Maybe that is the lesson for the people in the House; maybe it took 50 years for the families of Ballymurphy to get the answers and justice that they deserve because of attitudes that defend the state even when the state is wrong. The state of Israel is wrong.

One life lost is one too many. Fifty-eight children. Listen to those who defended that today in the words of "go compare". It is totally shocking. Two hundred and twenty people have been killed. Bombs. Heavy artillery. Bombs are blowing homes apart and forcing people from where they live and who have nowhere to go. Can you imagine the fear? Imagine the fear under which those people are living. There are people in the House who cannot even stand together to condemn the murder of innocent people. Have we learned nothing? I send solidarity, with party colleagues, to those in the Gaza Strip. We should look at the bigger picture and see what is happening there. All violence is wrong. There are no winners — we know that in this House — only losers and families who are left behind with pain for years. That is the legacy. There is no right answer, but it is time for the international community to step in and to take action. The whole world is watching and is united in its disgust at what is happening and in its horror at innocent children and people being blown to bits. This debate has shocked me today, Mr Speaker. I thought that we were beyond this.

**Mr McNulty:** "Tonight, I put the kids to sleep in our bedroom. So that when we die, we die together and no one would live to mourn the loss of one another."

Those are the words of a young mother named Eman in Gaza, which were relayed by Congressperson Rashida Tlaib —

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member move over to the microphone? He is not being picked up.

**Mr McNulty:** Over 200 Palestinians are dead, including 58 children and 33 women. More than 1,200 people have been injured. Eight people have been killed in Israel, including a child and a police officer. We have all seen the images of families crouched over the rubble of what was once their home, in despair and grief. We should know from here that one death for political reasons is one too many. When is the international community going to say, "Enough is enough"? The rocket attacks on Israel are wrong, but Israel's response is completely disproportionate. Israel's violence and discrimination against and attempted erasure of the Palestinian people is appalling. The bombing must stop. We must reach a peaceful settlement. The international community must step forward now.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes that item of business. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for a Member who is speaking in the House to use swear words?

**Mr Speaker:** It would certainly be inappropriate. I have not heard any swear words. You might draw my attention to it later, but I will check Hansard.

**Mr Allister:** I ask you to look at Mr Carroll's speech in Hansard.

**Mr Speaker:** I will do.

**Mr Carroll:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I did not use any swear words. Can you check Hansard, Mr Speaker, where Mr Humphrey alleged, or at least insinuated, once again that Palestinian protests in Belfast are leading to a rise in antisemitic attacks in our city? Everybody here is opposed to antisemitism. Such comments are inaccurate, unfounded and have no basis in evidence.

**Mr Speaker:** OK. I reiterate the point that I made earlier. We have dealt with two issues that are undoubtedly challenging to Members across the House. I am very pleased that, for the most part, the contributions were measured, balanced and robust, as I would expect. Members gave their critique and analysis of the situations but largely did so in a respectful manner. That is what the House needs to do on an ongoing basis.

I will check Hansard, but I hope that the matter will rest. The discussions have been had. The debates are over. Let us hope that we can put them to rest.

**Mr Buckley:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Today, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) has produced its report on the Bobby Storey funeral. I understand that a written statement has been placed in the Library for Members' interest. Given its importance, would it not be in order for the Minister of Justice to be in the House today to give an oral statement and allow questions from Members on the report?

**Mr Speaker:** As you have rightly pointed out, Members have received a statement from the Minister of Justice. I have not had any requests yet, but, as you will appreciate, I am in the Chair. I am not aware of any request to come to the House having been put in by the Minister. I always welcome Ministers' coming to the House on important matters. I have no doubt that the Minister will want to address it at some point. When? I cannot speak for her, so I do not know, but your point has been made publicly on the record.

*(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair)*

1.00 pm

## Ministerial Statement

### CCEA Qualifications in the 2021-22 Academic Year: Awarding Arrangements

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Education that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in light of social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members present in the Chamber must also do that but may do so by rising in their place as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Table directly.

I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions; this is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions are not permitted. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period afterwards.

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement to outline to the House the arrangements for awarding Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) qualifications in the next academic year. I am delighted to be in the position to bring forward, in advance of the start of the next academic year, a clear plan for qualifications in 2022. I hope that this timely announcement and the comprehensive package of measures that I have put in place will provide school leaders, teachers, parents and, most importantly, our young people with the clarity and reassurance that they need.

During the past weeks, my officials worked closely with CCEA and met a wide range of stakeholders to develop detailed arrangements. I thank all those, particularly the young people in the schools that my officials visited across Northern Ireland and the representatives of the Secondary Students' Union, who engaged with officials. Those young people brought fresh and constructive perspectives on the issues, and I hope that they will see today how they have influenced the decisions that I have taken. I assure you that we have listened and reflected on the wide range of views and the issues that were raised with us.

Today, I am announcing a road map for a return to public examinations for all CCEA qualifications in 2022. I cannot praise enough our school leaders and teachers who stepped forward to provide centre-determined grades with fairness and consistency. Their dedication and professionalism enables our students to obtain those important qualifications during the current crisis. However, such an arrangement is not a sustainable or long-term approach. With the roll-out of the vaccine programme and the improving public health situation, my priority is to return to public examinations during the next academic year.

Contingency arrangements for alternative awarding based on centres' professional judgement will be in place should

they be required. I sincerely hope that that will not be the case, but please be assured that a plan B is in train. As we know all too well, the public health situation can change quickly. Whilst we remain hopeful, any decline could, potentially, lead to the cancellation of examinations again. Contingency plans for alternative awarding in 2022 will build on the outworking of and learning from this year's approach that was based on the use of centre-determined grades.

A planned return to public examinations is not, however, a return to business as usual. I am mindful of the need to consider our young people's mental health and well-being, the many difficulties that they have faced with such resilience and fortitude and the significant disruption to their learning during not one but two academic years. In light of that, I have decided that young people will have significantly fewer examinations in 2022, and today I am announcing a package of significant reductions in assessment across the range of CCEA qualifications.

A unit of study will be omitted from the vast majority of GCSE, AS and A-level qualifications in 2022. In each qualification, CCEA will select the unit to be omitted. That will provide a consistent and equitable approach for all our young people. It will also provide clarity for universities, which will know precisely what content has been assessed. Unit omissions will also be applied across a wide range of CCEA entry-level occupational studies and vocationally related qualifications. Schools, of course, will aim to teach the omitted content in order to support and underpin progression, but the pressure of assessment will be reduced.

I want our young people to be engaged and motivated to learn. With fewer examinations to prepare for, I hope that they will have time and space to enjoy their learning and the wide range of extracurricular and enrichment activities that our schools offer. Above all, I want young people to enjoy a challenging and broad curriculum that supports them to develop the tools and skills that they need to become independent, lifelong learners. Of course, some young people will be keen to take all examinations in the qualification, and that option will be available to them.

I pay tribute to the high-quality remote learning provided by our schools during the spring term. Many pupils engaged positively with remote learning. However, there is no substitute for face-to-face teaching. Some of our young people undoubtedly found remote learning difficult, and others struggled with motivation and engagement. The reduction to qualifications that I am announcing will also provide the necessary flexibility for schools in the event that there is ongoing disruption during the next academic term.

I now will provide the House with more details on each type of qualification. First, I turn to GCSEs for students who are entering their second year of study in September. Those young people have lost a full term of face-to-face teaching during the first year of their GCSE studies. Consequently, I am making significant reductions to the assessment across all GCSE courses. Therefore, building on the arrangements agreed last autumn, units or modules will be omitted from the majority of GCSE qualifications. CCEA will publish details confirming the omissions in each qualification by 1 June. That will give schools time to plan the delivery of those courses in advance of the new academic year.

In the autumn, I announced bespoke arrangements for five GCSE qualifications which were made up of two equal units. Those arrangements will again be in place for those qualifications for the next academic year, meaning that candidates will complete a minimum of 60% of assessment in all GCSEs. This bespoke approach for CCEA GCSEs balances significant reductions to assessment with ensuring the continued worth, validity and portability of these important qualifications.

Of course, GCSE English and maths are of key significance. I am happy to announce that candidates will be permitted to omit the controlled assessment unit in GCSE English language. That part of the course requires a significant amount of class time to prepare for assessment and results in large amounts of marking for teachers. Its omission will free up time for wider teaching and learning experiences in English, including a focus on communications skills following the isolation of the lockdown period.

My Department and CCEA have also looked very closely at GCSE maths. Due to the unique structure of this qualification, with many different pathways at different tiers or entry levels, omitting a unit can, unfortunately, have negative consequences for learners. That approach would potentially make it more difficult for our young people to achieve the highest grades in mathematics. Again, due to its unique circumstances and structure, omission of a unit would also remove assessment of nearly half of this key passport qualification which is required for a number of higher education courses, such as nursing and teaching. For those reasons, I do not believe that omitting a unit is the right approach for GCSE maths. However, I am very conscious that learners have experienced significant disruption. Therefore, CCEA will provide additional examination aids for all candidates to use in the autumn 2021 and summer 2022 examination series. I have also instructed my officials to explore what additional support could be provided to schools to help them in preparing year 12 students for GCSE maths.

I also want to mention our current year 10 learners who are starting their GCSE studies in September. I hope that they will be able to enjoy the two years of their course without significant disruption, and, at this stage, the expectation is that they will complete all of their GCSE assessments. I reassure parents and pupils, however, that my Department and CCEA will closely monitor the situation and will not hesitate to make changes to GCSE qualifications for those young people, if required.

CCEA will also provide a recommended GCSE teaching order for that year group, which will make it easier to make changes, if needed. It was extremely disappointing to have to cancel the planned January examination series earlier this year due to the spike in COVID cases. To mitigate that risk, I have moved the usual January series for GCSE maths and English forward to December. I hope that that may provide an opportunity for young people to experience public examinations for the first time.

Turning to A-level qualifications, at both AS and A level, a unit that is selected by CCEA will be omitted for the majority of subjects. That reflects the disruption that has been experienced during the AS year by those candidates who are now starting their A2 studies. I know that those who are beginning their AS courses in September have experienced disruption during both years of their GCSE

studies. I want them to feel supported as they make the transition to the next level of their education and for schools to have time to reinforce and recap core concepts.

In a number of practical subjects at both AS and A level, internal assessment tasks will be reduced, rather than having a unit omitted. That approach will ensure that the assessment of practical skills remains a key element of A-level qualifications, and that young people have the opportunity to develop those important skills. Practical work can engage and motivate many young people and is the very reason why they choose certain subjects. I have been careful, therefore, to maintain, wherever possible, the role of practical assessment in A-level qualifications. I can advise that CCEA A-level qualifications in 2022 will be based on candidates' A2 outcomes.

In line with arrangements in both England and Wales, centre-determined grades for AS qualifications in 2021 will not form part of the A-level award next year. Last year, many young people and parents wanted the AS grade to contribute towards the A-level grade. Having talked to young people and parents, I know that, this year, many feel that, due to the greater level of disruption that they experienced during their AS courses, they would prefer their A-level grades to be based on the A2 results only. It is simply not possible to add an AS grade to A2 marks in a way that is fair or equitable for young people. If we convert the AS grades into a mark for each grade, young people who would normally be separated by only a few marks — for example, those who are at the top of the B band and those who are at the bottom of the A grade — would be separated by a full sixty marks. That is simply unfair. I plan that, with the resumption of public examinations next summer, we will return to the more normal situation, whereby AS outcomes in 2022 will contribute 40% of A-level awarding in 2023.

I will turn now to the next steps. This week, my Department will write to all schools, parents and students, setting out the decisions in more detail. In early June, CCEA will produce addenda to the specifications for each qualification, setting out the units that may be omitted, as well as specifying the teaching order for those students who are embarking on GCSEs in September. Over the coming months, my Department will work closely with CCEA to consider all the logistics to support a return to public examinations. We will also finalise the contingency arrangements, should they be needed. My Department will also continue to work closely with colleagues in England and Wales on grading standards. Whilst decisions on standards will be taken together across all three jurisdictions, I can give an assurance that generous grading will form part of the arrangements for 2022.

I want to address young people directly. Many of you have faced extremely difficult times. All of you have paid a considerable price for the disruption of the past year. You have not been able to enjoy the company of your friends, sports and the many other activities in which you usually take part. I hope that the return to school and lifting of restrictions will help you as we come into the summer months. Your schools have worked extremely hard to prepare you for the next stage of your learning, and they have every confidence in you. However, I know that many of you may not feel ready for the challenges next year and are concerned about your future. A lot of you are nervous about sitting public examinations for the first time. I want to

assure you that the school leaders whom I have spoken to recognise that and are putting plans in place to help you to gain confidence and experience during the coming year. I hope that the unit omissions that I have announced and a generous approach to grading will reassure you further. In Northern Ireland, we are fortunate to have an outstanding education system, and I know that your teachers will be there to support you throughout the year ahead.

I am regularly astounded by your talent, resilience and ingenuity, and I hope that, following today's announcement, you will face the year ahead with renewed confidence and optimism.

#### 1.15 pm

In conclusion, I thank the House for the opportunity to address you on those important issues. Fairness to pupils is my priority and will continue to be at the forefront of every decision that I take. Today I set out my road map for qualifications in the year ahead. It is a map that acknowledges the unprecedented disruption that our education system has faced and aims, in steady steps, to support recovery. My approach in the face of the worst disruption to education since the Second World War has been to protect the progress of our students. In these exceptional times, I have taken exceptional and unprecedented decisions to ensure that our young people are supported to progress to the next stages of education, employment or training. I commend the statement to the House.

**Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education):** At the outset, I will say that it is somewhat disappointing that neither the Education Minister nor CCEA engaged substantively with the Education Committee on this important matter; indeed, it is regrettable that the approach taken by the Education Minister on exams this year has placed so much significant additional pressure on the well-being of pupils across Northern Ireland.

Turning to next year's approach, will the Education Minister confirm whether Z-scoring will be used to estimate marks for pupils who choose to omit units or whether their grades will be based solely on exams sat?

**Mr Weir:** As indicated, units will be omitted for the vast majority. A uniform approach will be taken to the units that are omitted. The idea is that the units that will be omitted will be established by CCEA, so it is not a question of people picking from a menu of units. The detail of that should then negate the issue. Some pupils may want to sit every unit, although I suspect that those pupils may be relatively rare. They may feel that, if they are being tested over the full range of the units, that will be to their advantage, and that will be facilitated as well.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, you will know that not all young people will want to use their qualifications strictly to go into university but may want to follow a professional course in higher education. How will those providers of higher education react to the decisions that you have announced today?

**Mr Weir:** There has been consultation with higher education providers. Some Members will always raise a concern that we are trying to make sure that things are in line, but it strikes me that, in ensuring that our young people are not disadvantaged, whether it is with university places or anywhere else, specific provision is put in place.

There has been consultation on higher education between CCEA, in particular, and UCAS. That has involved the local universities, the Medical Schools Council and, because a number of our students may want to seek qualifications in the Republic of Ireland, the Irish Universities Association. All were understanding of the exceptional circumstances created by the pandemic. They were supportive of the return to public examinations and willing to work with exam boards and regulators on adaptations to qualifications.

They know that there will be consistency across schools in what they are being assessed on because the units that have been omitted will be specified by CCEA. They will know precisely what pupils are being assessed on. Schools will aim to teach all content so that no one is disadvantaged. That will reinforce a level playing field across a number of jurisdictions to make sure that the qualifications of our young people are not seen in a different way from those who get qualifications from other jurisdictions and that, therefore, they will not be disadvantaged when it comes to places.

**Mr Sheehan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. I welcome the fact that the Department and CCEA have identified interventions that will support students in the forthcoming academic year, given the huge disruption to their education since the pandemic started. Will the Minister explain the decision to omit certain units from courses? How does that decision sit with the feedback that he received from the Secondary Students' Union? Do our teachers support that decision?

**Mr Weir:** There has been considerable consultation on that. Unit omission is on the basis that it is the same across the board. Somebody going through one set of school gates will not have an advantage or disadvantage compared with someone going through another set. We spoke extensively to young people and a range of stakeholders, particularly the Secondary Students' Union, on that basis. I do not want to put words in people's mouths, but I think that, broadly speaking, they were content with the direction of travel. Their particular concern was that there be fairness and equality for all students. The omission of particular units is therefore in line with what they were seeking. If I drill it down to one phrase, it was about "cutting the content" to make sure that, given the unique circumstances, people will not be assessed on the full content, at least unless someone wanted to volunteer for that. The proposals will, I believe, be reasonably widely welcomed, particularly by young people, judging by the responses that we have received from them about the proposals.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Minister for being here and for his statement today. Minister, I draw it to your attention that one of the measures that you are putting in place is totally counter-intuitive. While I welcome the general direction of your measures, moving January exams to the previous December is inappropriate. Giving our young people less time will only increase stress and anxiety. That is particularly true for mathematics because its content is not being reduced. Will you urgently reconsider that decision? English and mathematics are key subjects in which our young people deserve the best opportunity to achieve the best that they can.

**Mr Weir:** The Member may or may not be aware that those who take that module have the opportunity to do so in a winter series, which would, effectively, pre-empt

the summer exam, or the summer series. There is no compulsion to take it in the winter. We all hope that there is no disruption. In many ways, simply taking everything in January would have put all of our eggs in one basket, and it had the potential to disadvantage people. That is why those examinations have been brought forward, and there is still the opportunity for them to be taken in the summer series.

**Mrs Barton:** I want to probe a little further into GCSE mathematics. You said that there might be additional examination aids for candidates. Will consideration be given to allowing pupils who are taking GCSE mathematics, the content of which has not been cut, to retake their exam for free at a later date if they do not do as well as they anticipated?

**Mr Weir:** The aim is to develop maths. It is for CCEA to look at the charging structure. The structure of GCSE mathematics does not lend itself to reduced content. Part of the problem is that M1 to M4 represent about 45%. If we were to drop a unit of assessment, the only option would be to do so at that earlier stage, and that would disadvantage a range of pupils. I will give an example: at the moment, someone could do a combination of an M4 and an M7 and may be able to achieve, for example, an A grade. The way in which the structure works, however, means that, if you were purely taking an M7, you would not be able to achieve an A grade simply by taking that one unit, which creates a barrier. CCEA will, I think, look at the aids that will be there. I am sure that, as we move ahead, consideration will also be given to the fee structure and the cost of a retake.

**Mr Humphrey:** I declare an interest as a governor of the Belfast Model School for Girls.

Minister, you mentioned that young people had had a difficult year that was potentially unprecedented. You also mentioned that you had listened to and reflected on what they had had to say. What were the views of the young people, and where is that reflection in the policy and the statement?

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for his question. As he will be aware, young people will express a range of views. It is probably wrong for any of us to assume that they will be a homogenous unit in that regard.

The young people raised a range of concerns. They wanted clarity on qualifications. They were concerned about lack of exam experience and about practical work. Clearly, they were concerned about the impact on their mental health and well-being, and they were concerned about their future. They wanted a range of things, particularly equality — for example, a consistent approach to unit omission. They wanted recognition of the difficult period that they had gone through, which is reflected in the general level of reduction in assessment by way of unit omission or slimming down the content in units.

People coming from slightly different situations — for instance, in practical subjects — wanted to be able to take those subjects without being in any way disadvantaged; for example, had an approach been taken to omit one unit, that would have disadvantaged those taking practical subjects. It is about trying to cater for a wide range.

To take another example, optionality within questions is being looked at here and in other jurisdictions, but that

tends to disadvantage SEN students in particular and those who may be less academically focused. It is about fairness. All those factors were taken into account in today's decision.

**Ms Brogan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, you referenced collaboration with England and Wales and consultation between CCEA and UCAS in relation to third-level and further and higher education. What engagement have you had with your counterparts in the South?

**Mr Weir:** We need to make sure that examinations are fit for purpose and, in particular, do not act as a barrier or disadvantage for any of our young people seeking university places or furthering any career beyond that. I mentioned UCAS and the two universities in Northern Ireland, but there has also been engagement between CCEA and the Irish Universities Association, again to make sure that what we have is fit for purpose. That is important for general levels of mitigation and as we move ahead in the standard of assessment and generosity. If we put in place something that takes us out of line with other jurisdictions, we ultimately disadvantage our pupils in terms of generosity, and it is likely, therefore, that there will be a form of COVID tariff across the board. However, if we reach a situation in which we make it more difficult for our students to achieve particular grades, they are put at a disadvantage compared with counterparts in London, Dublin, Edinburgh, Cardiff or wherever. Similarly, if we put in place something that is seen as more generous and has a higher level of mitigation, there is a danger that universities across the board may take the view that a particular grade from CCEA in Northern Ireland would be of lesser worth, if you like, than other grades. It is important that we keep in step.

Although there is a level of control over what we can do through CCEA in Northern Ireland, particularly with A levels and to a lesser extent with GCSEs, students have the freedom to take examinations from outside Northern Ireland. It is important that we create as level a playing field as possible for all our students, because fairness and equality have to be at the heart of this.

### 1.30 pm

**Mr M Bradley:** I thank the Minister for appearing before us today and giving us the statement. Minister, how can you ensure the portability of GCSE qualifications so that students from Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged when competing for places at universities outside Northern Ireland?

**Mr Weir:** Portability, which is ensuring that what is awarded in Northern Ireland is on a level playing field with what is awarded everywhere else, is critical. There will be equality in GCSEs, with CCEA specifying the unit that is omitted, irrespective of the school that anyone goes to, whether it is here or across the water. Portability, as much as possible, will mean a level playing field, and the fact that the unit is specified means that universities, when assessing students from here, will know precisely what has been studied and will not need to delve into each individual school.

As I mentioned, in the days ahead it is also critical that — sometimes this can be seen as being a political point, but it is really a practical one — we have a level of compatibility in our standards with England and Wales in particular.

Scotland, with its Highers, has a slightly different system. It is critical that we are not seen to be either more generous or less generous than is the case in England and Wales, because either would create disadvantage for our pupils. It is important that, as they move ahead, people be given the opportunity not just in other jurisdictions but in Northern Ireland.

**Ms Mullan:** Minister, I welcome your giving earlier direction and clarity this year. I declare an interest as the mother of a year 12 student. You will have heard me say that before, but, from her perspective and that of other students whom I have spoken to over the past couple of weeks, because some schools have continued with ongoing assessment, that pressure on them has affected their mental health and well-being. What consideration have you and CCEA given to a recovery curriculum for our students?

**Mr Weir:** There are a number of points to make. There is reduced content for assessment, so it will level out. Part of the problem that we have had with assessments is the fact that schools were given a level of freedom to do them. To move towards a point at which qualifications are given, there is no easy path, which I entirely appreciate.

At a broader level, I have also said that all of us of working age, although this may not always be acknowledged by all of us, have probably had it a little bit easier during the pandemic than, at one end of the scale, the elderly in society, who have suffered higher mortality rates and greater levels of isolation, and, at the other end, our young people. Those groups have suffered the most throughout the pandemic, so it is important that every step be taken to address that.

There will be work done between CCEA and schools on a recovery curriculum. There will be specific work on two levels and not just during the summer period, when there will be a range of interventions. As we move ahead and scope out the details, there will be a further roll-out and strengthening of the Engage programme, which will help on the academic side of things. It is also the case that, as we develop the permanent roll-out of the emotional health and well-being support, there will be specific support for schools for that by way of COVID recovery funding.

All of us fear the impact that students having had to go in and out of school has had on them. There has been a tremendous amount of resilience shown among young people, but there may well be a lot of problems with stress and mental health that are not apparent on day one but that become apparent on day one of month six or month 12. It is therefore important that we have versatility from the Education and Health Departments so that we are able to provide that support for our young people.

**Mr McNulty:** Minister, thank you for your statement and for meeting this morning with the board of governors and principal of St Joseph and St James's Primary School, Poyntzpass. They are really excited about their new school, but equally they are frustrated about the delays in delivering it. They are very grateful that the Minister, along with his Department, has committed to delivering the school as soon as possible.

I welcome the general thrust of the Minister's statement today, which has the best interests of children and young people at heart. However, he must recognise that the disruption has not been evenly distributed during the pandemic. The gap has widened for children from

disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs. How will he accommodate them in the awarding of grades in the coming months and years? How will they be helped to ensure that they are not left further behind?

**Mr Weir:** The Member makes a valid point. I enjoyed the engagement with him this morning, and it is good to see him in the flesh rather than down the lens of a Zoom camera.

Part of the issue, which is more difficult to deal with directly, is the impact that it has had on people who have been in very similar situations. There will be different levels of impact for individuals, depending on their nature or, perhaps, their home setting; there is a range of things. You may well get two students who live next door to each other and, for a range of reasons, the impact on one will be greater than on the other.

In the broader area of academic catch-up — I know that this will cause a level of frustration among some other schools as well — the Engage programme will continue to operate on a two-tier basis. That means that, while there is a level of support for every school, an arbitrary line has to be drawn. There is a much greater level of funding for schools with a higher than average free school meals entitlement. I appreciate that that line is arbitrary, but the Engage programme heavily favours providing a greater level of support where there is social disadvantage. Inevitably, though, when you draw a line, people will fall on one side of it or the other. That is how we will move ahead, and, if any additional bespoke support can be given to students, we will certainly look into that.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Minister for this announcement, which is timely for students who face exams next year. I want to revisit the Chair's question because I did not quite get the answer. I do not know whether I missed it; I apologise if I did. Just for clarity, where a student wants to achieve an A or an A-plus but does not want to sit all units, will that still be possible? The statement mentions generous grading. Will that be achievable for students who will not sit all the units?

**Mr Weir:** Let us be clear: the general level of assessment will mean that the vast majority of students will not sit all units. The point about the levels of assessment is that CCEA will provide the detailed specifications to schools at the beginning of June on what units will be omitted for assessment. It is important that students are afforded a rounded approach to their education. This will give some GCSE students a springboard to AS and A levels. However, a student will not be able to pick from a menu, saying that they will not take this, that or the other. The approach will be consistent across the board. I anticipate that the vast majority of students will take the reduced level of units, which will be the same for all students. The point is that — it may be for a very small number of students, or it may not even happen at all — there will also be an option for someone who wants to take every unit and be assessed on them.

**Mr McGuigan:** At critical junctures in the course of the pandemic, the Minister has been criticised for failure to adequately consult key stakeholders when it came to making important decisions. His statement mentions some engagement with stakeholders, particularly young people, in the process that he has outlined. Will he assure us that

teachers, trade unions and the wider school sector will be involved in the finalisation of arrangements for next year? Has a reference group of key stakeholders been established?

**Mr Weir:** A range of work has been undertaken throughout, particularly with stakeholders. Specifically, we have tried to have a level of engagement with young people, and we had those meetings with the Secondary Students' Union. There may be a degree of myth, particularly as regards any form of exams announcement. In working with stakeholders on those matters, we have engaged with a range of post-primary school principals, as we have done previously.

There is a balance to be struck on these issues. There will always be some criticism that we could have gone further with our consultation and discussions. On the flip side, that has to be balanced with ensuring that there are timely announcements. This will be an ongoing process. The Department could have gone through another six months of consultation with stakeholders, but that would not have given people certainty. On the flip side, without that consultation, something of this nature could have been announced a month or two ago. It is about trying to get the balance correct, and we believe that we have done that.

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Minister for his statement and his engagement with the Secondary Students' Union. It is great to see that that new and vibrant voice for young people has been heavily relied upon here, and I hope that its considerations and thoughts will be included.

Minister, the interim mental health champion has strongly advised you that young people should not be rushed into academic work and that, rather, their mental health needs to be catered for first. How have you taken that into consideration as part of the new arrangements? Can you assure us that adequate time and resources will be devoted to our young people's social and emotional needs, as well as the drive for academic success and excellence?

**Mr Weir:** Their social needs are important. A package of measures has already been announced, and some more will come forward. I have mentioned that the emotional health and well-being framework will be in place on a permanent basis. That may be seen, to some extent, as a little bit top-down. Specific COVID funding for emotional health and well-being is there and will be given out to schools on a pro rata basis, as it was this year, and there will be a level of flexibility for that to be decided on the ground.

As the Member will be aware, over the summer, there will be two levels of interventions utilising, in particular, youth groups, and a range of funding, through Access for All, Summer Boost, Summer Jam etc will deliver a lot of the non-academic interventions. The provision that we are making available for schools to engage on a voluntary basis over the summer is about providing not simply academic support but a range of activities. There is a balance to be struck. Also, the advice and guidance that was given as year groups resumed school and which a lot of schools took up was about easing students in and trying to identify where there were particular stresses and needs. Ultimately, there is no getting away from the fact that, if qualifications are to be achieved, a level of academic intervention will be required as well.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for his statement today. Our teachers and school leaders are rightly concerned that other arrangements may be employed should pupils lose any more face-to-face teaching between now and when exams are scheduled. Can the Minister provide any more detail on the contingency plans for next summer's assessments so that students and teachers are not thrown into the deep end again? How will he ensure that lessons will be learned from the difficulties that teachers have faced and continue to face?

**Mr Weir:** There are a couple of points to be made. The contingency plans will be worked on, and the detail will be revealed in the autumn by CCEA for the schools. That will be largely based around the arrangements on centre-determined grades. The idea is to try to learn whatever lessons there are from this year and see how the contingencies can be adapted. One important aspect, which should mean that schools will be ready to deal with situations, is that, at this stage and from the beginning of June, CCEA will be giving clear guidance to schools about the order of teaching that will take place. The danger is if we reach a particular point in the year where there is widespread disruption. The fact that that would be largely across the piece can be taken into account with a level of adaptation. While contingency plans will be put in place, all of us hope that we are moving to an era in which levels of disruption and, indeed, disruption as a whole can be largely avoided in the future.

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you, Minister. I declare an interest because my daughter is the Secondary Students' Union's good relations officer. I am not asking about that, however.

Minister, what is the rationale behind the permission to omit the GCSE English language controlled assessment unit, and can a pupil or school choose to sit it if they so wish?

**1.45 pm**

**Mr Weir:** In answer to the first question, it is up to the individual pupil. Pupils, across the board, have an option. In the vast majority of cases, pupils will take the general position that, if a unit has been omitted, that reduces the burden. There is the option, I think in every course, that, if someone wants to take all of the units, they can take all of the units. The GCSE in English language was looked at in considerable detail, and I think that the rationale behind that is principally that preparation for that particular controlled assessment unit takes up quite a large amount of time for the student. The omission of that assessment will free up additional teaching and learning time and, very significantly, will reduce the assessment burden on young people. Obviously, as I indicated, there is still the option that anybody who wants to take all units can do so.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** No other Member has indicated to me that they wish to ask the Minister a question, so I ask the House to take its ease for a few moments to allow the Communities Minister to arrive in the Chamber to move the next item of business. Thank you.

## Executive Committee Business

### Pension Schemes Bill: Further Consideration Stage

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

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Minister. As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Pension Schemes Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. Further Consideration Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to Mr Speaker. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment before we move on to the next item of business. That was short and sharp, Minister.



## The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Suspension of Liability for Wrongful Trading) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

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

*That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Suspension of Liability for Wrongful Trading) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate.

**Mrs Dodds:** I seek the Assembly's approval of a statutory rule (SR) that has been made under powers contained in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020. The Act includes five temporary provisions to assist companies in financial difficulties as a result of the pandemic. The measures are identical to those that have been put in place in Great Britain. As many Members will recall, I have brought forward regulations in recent months in order to extend the period during which four of the five temporary measures are to apply. I have done so each time to ensure that local businesses enjoy the same support and assistance as those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The regulations that I now ask you to approve relate to the fifth temporary measure, which is the suspension of liability for what is known as "wrongful trading". Wrongful trading occurs where a director permits a company that is known to be insolvent to continue trading, thereby increasing the loss to creditors. If the company is subsequently wound up, the director can be ordered by the High Court to make a contribution to the company's assets out of his or her own pocket.

There is no doubt that the measures taken to curb the spread of coronavirus will have pushed many normally solvent and profitable companies into financial difficulties. There is, therefore, an obvious danger that, if directors are worried about the possibility of incurring personal liability if they continue to operate, they will opt in favour of closure to protect themselves. That would, of course, be to the detriment of their employees and the wider economy. It is likely that many of those companies could, given time, regain their solvency and profitability once normal trading resumes. Provision was therefore included in the Act to give temporary exemption to directors from any personal liability for any worsening of a company's financial position until 30 September 2020. As the pandemic has had a longer and deeper impact on the economy than was originally anticipated, I introduced regulations in December 2020 to reinstate the measure for a further period ending on 30 April 2021. A decision has now been made by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) that the measure to protect directors should be further extended until 30 June 2021. It is essential that company directors in Northern Ireland have the same protection as is enjoyed by their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom and for the same period. Accordingly, my Department has introduced regulations to ensure that wrongful trading provisions also remain suspended in Northern Ireland until 30 June 2021.

The regulations have been agreed by the Economy Committee, and my Executive colleagues were advised prior to the debate. I ask, therefore, that the Assembly approve the regulations.

**Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** I apologise to the Minister for missing the opening of her remarks.

On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion. As the Minister indicated, the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Suspension of Liability for Wrongful Trading) Regulations (NI) 2021 will further assist companies affected by the pandemic. The rule will restore provision in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 suspending directors' liability for wrongful trading and extending the operation of that provision until 30 June 2021.

The Committee agreed the statutory rule at its meeting on 14 April, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, and the rule came into operation on 29 April. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has no issue with the rule, and I support the motion to confirm it on the Committee's behalf.

I will speak briefly in my capacity as Sinn Féin economy spokesperson. As I have said a number of times and as the Minister has outlined again today, with the continued impact of the pandemic on our businesses, it is appropriate that the provisions are extended to support them in this difficult period.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** No other Member has indicated to me that they wish to speak in the debate, therefore I will put the Question — I beg your pardon, Minister: would you like to wind up the debate? I am sorry. *[Laughter.]* Be mindful of the fact that it is 1.54 pm.

**Mrs Dodds:** I am completely mindful of that fact. Let me just say, "Thank you" to the Economy Committee and to colleagues for their support for the measure. It is important that we give businesses every opportunity to recover from the very difficult period that they have been through. We will continue to try to help them as best we can.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sorry for trying to rush the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Suspension of Liability for Wrongful Trading) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** It is now 1.55 pm, and Question Time starts at 2.00 pm. I therefore ask the House to take its ease while there is a change at the top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### The Executive Office

#### 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions': Update

1. **Ms Brogan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions'. (AQO 2033/17-22)

11. **Mr Harvey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they plan to review further easing of restrictions before the next formal review date as outlined in 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions'. (AQO 2043/17-22)

**Mrs Foster (The First Minister):** Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 1 and 11 together. I am pleased to say that we continue to make good progress in our pathways out of restriction. At the Executive meeting on 13 May, we made decisions on the further reopening of our economy and society as part of our formal review of the pathway. We had good news for those with marriage and civil partnerships planned, the hospitality sector, for those looking forward to visiting their friends and family in private homes and for those needing a hug.

The COVID data continues to have a generally positive direction of travel, and we look forward to ratifying those decisions on 20 May, subject to an update on the public health situation. While the review process allows the Executive the flexibility to move rapidly on emerging priorities, the next major review point will take place on 10 June. That will allow for data on a range of health and societal impacts to be monitored and assessed before consideration is given to what further relaxations can be made safely.

**Ms Brogan:** I thank the joint First Minister for her answer. Given the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on the most vulnerable in our society, does the Minister agree that the Executive's recovery strategy should focus on addressing social inequalities as we emerge from the pandemic?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for her question. As she is probably aware, the task force is looking not only at economic recovery but at societal recovery. We have always said that, if we can do things better after the COVID-19 pandemic, we should take the opportunity to do so. The task force will work not only with the lead Departments in those areas, such as the Department for the Economy for economic recovery, but with the other Departments involved in health inequalities, societal inequalities, and the Member's colleague the Minister for Communities will be very much part of those discussions. Therefore, the Executive are working on that, and I hope that we can build back better.

**Mr Harvey:** First Minister, can you give any indication on a time frame for the resumption of foreign travel?

**Mrs Foster:** The current requirements that are in place for international travellers vary according to whether they are arriving from a green, amber or red country. Red countries are those that the Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) has assessed as being particularly concerning for the prevalence of variants, including the Indian variant. Arrivals from red countries must book a managed isolation package prior to arrival and spend 10 days in a hotel after arrival in Northern Ireland, and India is on the Northern Ireland red list.

Those arriving from amber countries must book and take a post-arrival test on day two and day eight, and must self-isolate at home for 10 days from arrival. Green countries are those that the JBC has assessed as low risk. Arrivals to Northern Ireland from green countries do not need to self-isolate or enter managed isolation. They must book and take a day two test. Northern Ireland does not currently have any countries on its green list, and the Executive are considering the most appropriate list for Northern Ireland. I very much hope that we will be able to have an outcome on that list this week.

**Mr McGrath:** Many businesses, especially those in the hospitality sector, faced significant problems when they reopened. After spending tens of thousands of pounds to get ready, they found out that they did not meet some established criteria. As businesses become permitted to open up, has any proactive work been undertaken to help sectors try to ensure that they meet any criteria prior to the opening date so that they are not, very quickly, told that they have to close again?

**Mrs Foster:** The Member is probably referring to the outdoor hospitality issue, on which some issues were raised with us directly. The regulations had not changed from last year. The difference was that some councils took a more proactive approach to enforcement this year. Things that should not have been happening last year, and to which a blind eye was turned and no enforcement applied, were subject to enforcement this year, and, unfortunately, some organisations, having spent a lot of money — we understand that — felt that they could not open because they were in breach of the regulations. There is therefore an important emphasis placed on engagement. Last Thursday, the deputy First Minister and I met Hospitality Ulster and the Hotels Federation to discuss the issues again, coming up to next Monday, which is when we are hoping that we will open indoor hospitality. We will be confirming that this Thursday. We are keeping a close eye on the Indian variant, as, I am sure, the Chair of the Committee would want us to do. We are concerned about what we see in England, Scotland and Wales at present. We are very pleased that there is no evidence of significant community transmission in Northern Ireland, and we want that to remain the case, so we will listen to our advisers this Thursday to hear what they have to say about all those issues.

**Mr Allister:** Given the approach of the Twelfth of July celebrations in this centenary year, and given the very long lead-in time required organisationally, what certainty and guidance can be given to those who are organising the demonstrations?

**Mrs Foster:** That is a very good point and one that I raised just last week, because it is important that people have a clear vision of what is happening before the Twelfth of July celebrations. I pay tribute to the organisations for the way in which they conducted themselves and abided by the regulations last year. They were quite innovative. I am sure that the Member will remember the Twelfth at Home initiative, for instance. Along with the Health Minister, I am hoping to meet the Grand Orange Lodge in the very near future to discuss the issues and to see what will be possible in July, because it is important that people be able to have their cultural expression but obviously in a safe way, and that is what we want to ensure.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I place on record my thanks to the First Minister for all her work during the COVID pandemic at the Executive table.

My question relates to the service stations that are located up and down our motorways. I appreciate why the Executive allowed them to remain open for indoor dining, but we are hearing from the contact-tracing service that there is a potential there for transmission. From 24 May, do you intend to introduce the contact-tracing provisions that will be required in all other restaurants?

**Mrs Foster:** In our discussions with the hospitality sector last week, the deputy First Minister and I said that we wanted to make sure that contact tracing is fit for purpose so that, if people come in for a meal or a drink, all the pieces are in place, and, if there is an outbreak, we will be able to trace it quickly and get to everyone who has been nearby or is at risk. The issue was discussed at the Executive last week, because colleagues were concerned that people are driving to service stations for a meal. I found that interesting. Anyway, this is apparently what is happening: people are so desperate to get out for a meal that they are going to a service station and sitting in there to eat. Of course, that is not what the regulation was designed to do. It was designed to allow truck drivers and people who ordinarily would not have access to such services to be able to continue to have a meal in service stations. Sometimes, when laws are made, the purpose behind them gets stretched. That is a good example of the purpose behind the reason for the regulation getting very stretched.

## Travel Agents (Coronavirus) Financial Assistance Scheme 2021: Update

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Travel Agents (Coronavirus) Financial Assistance Scheme 2021. (AQO 2034/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** The Travel Agents (Coronavirus) Financial Assistance Scheme was agreed by the Executive to ensure the continued viability of the travel agency sector here. The scheme is intended to help vulnerable but viable travel agents, including self-employed homeworkers, with the cost of reopening or keeping a business operational, reconnecting with employees and customers, adapting customer marketing and financial planning. A viable travel agents industry is critical to supporting a return to normal and building confidence that travel agents and other retail businesses will continue to be a feature of our high streets. The payments for the scheme should make a significant contribution to the continued viability of the sector here. The scheme was open for application from 19 March to 26 March 2021. Officials in TEO are processing 187

applications. It is anticipated that payments will be made to successful applicants in early summer. The scheme is expected to provide in the region of £1.1 million to £1.3 million of much-needed support for the sector. Final costs will be known once all applications have been processed.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you very much, First Minister, on behalf of travel agents who will benefit from the scheme. It is much-needed support. We recognise the value of travel agents to the economy of Northern Ireland. Their counterparts in the rest of the UK will be using the NHS app to prove that their clients have received the vaccination. The NHS app is not available to travel agents in Northern Ireland, yet most of their bookings are done on a UK-wide basis. If an online app is not available in Northern Ireland, what alternative is there to provide that information from citizens who wish to travel?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his question. In England and Wales, the apps speak to each other, but it does not do so in Scotland. There is an issue in Scotland and Northern Ireland. We have discussed it with the other devolved Administrations, as you would expect, under the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. We speak every week about the upcoming difficulties. In the short term, they are looking at having a paper trail if you have had your vaccination. That is not just a letter but, obviously, something that is compliant with safety and data protection rules to make sure that there is no fraud. You cannot just turn up with a letter that somebody from your office has typed out for you, for example. A lot of work is going in to data protection and cybersecurity issues around that. We will probably get an update on that this week. Scotland has a similar problem to ours, and we need to get the apps to speak to each other. Work is going on around the paper alternative, and work is also going on around the digital piece to see if we can get the apps all connected. They are meant to speak to each other. When I go across to England, I should be able to use the Northern Ireland app, so why can we not get it to work for the COVID certification as well? Work is going on, and I assure the Member that that is happening.

**Mr McHugh:** I totally understand that travel and tourism have suffered so much, and I appreciate the emphasis that has been placed on them, in particular. However, so many other industries and businesses have also suffered throughout the pandemic. Can the Minister provide details of the financial assistance that is in place for other industries?

**Mrs Foster:** I am happy to get the office to write to you with the full range of assistance that is available. Obviously, the COVID localised restrictions support scheme is still in place until such times as hospitality is open in full. There are probably schemes from the Department for the Economy that I do not know about. I would rather write to you with a more substantive answer so that you have all the schemes in front of you.

2.15 pm

## High Street Task Force

3. **Mr McCrossan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of whether the size of the high street task force is affecting its ability to make recommendations quickly. (AQO 2035/17-22)

10. **Dr Archibald** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the progress made to date by the high street task force. (AQO 2042/17-22)

13. **Mrs Cameron** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the high street task force. (AQO 2045/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3, 10 and 13 together.

The first meeting of the task force took place on 23 February and was 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. Recommendations for future action will be developed in due course.

Restoring the vibrancy of our high streets will take a number of phases over a period of years. As we emerge from the lockdown, the immediate priority is opening up high streets and rolling out a COVID recovery strategy. That is the focus of the Executive COVID task force headed by the interim head of the Civil Service (HOCS).

The high street task force will have the longer-term focus of addressing the fundamental need for the transformation of our high streets in response to fundamental societal and economic changes. In relation to membership of the task force, the key to success is co-design and co-delivery, drawing in the skills of business and other sectors to shape transformation. The breadth of the membership reflects the breadth of the challenge. While the membership is large, the governance arrangements of subgroups, each with a key function, will provide a basis for efficient and effective working.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the First Minister for that answer. First Minister, many of the sectors represented on the task force are unhappy that 20 sectors were vying to have their voices heard in a 90-minute meeting. I note that you said that subgroups had been set up — I welcome that — but what will you do to make sure that the task force is able to engage effectively?

**Mrs Foster:** I note what the Member says. The unfortunate thing about this is trying to find a balance. I have stood here or sat before the Committee and been challenged about the fact that x council or y council has not been involved or that such and such a sector needs to be involved. We have tried to have balance in the overall high street task force, but we have split it into four subgroups in the hope that we can have a more focused look at those areas. The subgroups can bring people on and consult people about the best way forward in relation to those issues.

There is no doubt that the recovery of the high street is a multilayered issue. We have had an issue with the challenges to the high street for a couple of years. COVID then came along and exacerbated that and accelerated some of the problems that high streets face, and we therefore need to have a focused look at what the future of our high streets is in Northern Ireland, whether they are in a village, a town or a city. We have set out an ambitious plan, and we ask people to bear with us and work with us, because it has the capacity to bring forward a vision for Northern Ireland that is different and that is ours. It is right that we have our own vision, but we will also look at examples in Scotland, England and Wales to see that we are on the right track.

**Dr Archibald:** As you outlined, Minister, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the issues faced by the high streets. Do you agree that the targeted engagement that you outlined, which will be carried out through the subgroups and will ensure that we know what is needed to revitalise and regenerate high streets, particularly with regard to smaller towns and villages, is important?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for her question. That is exactly what we want to see happen. Sometimes some of our councils feel that, to be able to contribute, they need to be stakeholders in the group, but I hope that they look at this in a more holistic way and recognise that, while the subject sits within TEO, it goes across all of the Departments, local government and, indeed, businesses. That is why we have business representatives there, so that they can bring their experience and their views on what they want to see happening on the high streets. I hope that it will be a focused engagement that delivers real and tangible results. As I said, the issue has gone on for a number of years, and we really need to grapple with it.

**Mrs Cameron:** Mr Speaker, with your indulgence, I take the opportunity to put on record my thanks to my friend the First Minister for her love of and commitment to Northern Ireland and for her dedication and incredible work ethic, not least throughout the past very difficult year.

Does the First Minister agree that the important work of the high street task force will need to continue well into the future, as the lengthy closures and the ending of the furlough scheme will have a long-lasting impact on our recovery?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for her kind words, and I absolutely will miss working with her in the Assembly.

Given its strategic role, we have established that the task force will probably be in existence for an initial period of five years, with an expectation of a review of its performance early in the next Assembly mandate so that we can see where we have got to, probably by this time next year. It is important that we realise that this not just a quick fix but will continue for a period of time. That is important, because the people on our high streets do not want us to come in, look at the issues, suggest a few things and leave again; they want us to continue to work with them in trying to develop high streets for the future, so there will be an initial period of five years.

**Ms Flynn:** The First Minister outlined some of the issues that high streets were facing even pre pandemic. All the work that the task force is carrying out is great. Does she have any update on another important initiative to help

support the high streets, namely the high street stimulus scheme?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for her question. That stimulus scheme will be brought forward by the Department for the Economy. We had hoped that that would have been rolled out faster, but there is no point in putting out a stimulus scheme until we were fully open, because the experience of going to our high street is, of course, enhanced by the fact that you can have lunch, have a coffee or have a drink. That has not been possible in an indoor setting and will not be until next Monday. I am sure that the Minister for the Economy will want to bring forward the high street stimulus scheme in the near future, because we hope that it will make a real difference to people who have had such a terrible year. 2020-21 will not be seen as a good year for our high streets, but I hope that we can help them to get onto an even footing again.

## Rights, Language and Identity Framework

4. **Mr McGlone** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister on what date the legislation for core elements of the rights, language and identity framework will be introduced to the Assembly. (AQO 2036/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** We are committed to the development and implementation of the rights, language and identity proposals in 'New Decade, New Approach'. It has always been our intention to progress those proposals during this mandate and to create the relevant bodies as quickly as possible thereafter. We will keep the Assembly updated on our progress.

**Mr McGlone:** As the Minister will be aware, I have worked with her in different roles in different Departments. We agreed on many things and, maybe, differed occasionally, but I take the opportunity to put it on the record that I wish her and her family well in the time ahead.

Given that a culture and language Bill was part of the bedrock of 'New Decade, New Approach', will the Minister give assurances that it is not being used as a political bargaining chip?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his question and, indeed, for his kind words, which he has already communicated to me. I thank him for that.

As the Member knows, there are many things in 'New Decade, New Approach' that should have moved on by now: progress on health transformation and having more police officers on the ground, down to very technical issues such as moving to three cycles of IVF instead of just two. There are a number of issues that have not been able to progress, and we all know that COVID-19 is the reason for that. However, he should know that we are committed, as I said in my answer, to the development and implementation of all the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach', and I am sure that those will progress now that we are, hopefully, moving into a better place in relation to COVID-19.

**Mr Beattie:** First Minister, I will not labour the point, but I thank you for your leadership as our First Minister. Of course, we all have disagreements, but we can believe that you honestly wanted to do the best for this part of the United Kingdom, and I thank you for that.

I want to follow up on the previous question. Will the Bill go through a full legislative process? Maybe you are doubling back on yourself. Is there an expectation that it will get Royal Assent before the end of the mandate?

**Mrs Foster:** I offer many congratulations to the Member as he takes on the role of leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. This is the first time that I have been in the House since his predecessor stepped down, and I wish Steve well as he moves away from the pressures and challenges of leadership, which we all do. I hope that he enjoys being on the Back Bench. Congratulations, Doug, and I hope that you enjoy your time as leader.

When we agreed New Decade, New Approach, the intent was, of course, to get Royal Assent by the end of this mandate. That was to be the way forward. It will be for others now to push ahead with all the promises in New Decade, New Approach, and that will move ahead according to their timetable.

I want to be clear: as I said in my resignation speech, in Northern Ireland there are people who are British, others who are Irish, others who are Northern Irish and others who are a mixture of all three. We also have a new and emerging community. We must all learn to be generous to each other, live together and share the wonderful country that we are all so privileged to represent in the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is my belief and, I hope, the belief of everyone in the Assembly. If we are to move forward, we cannot keep looking backwards. The future for Northern Ireland will not be found in division but in sharing the place that we all call home.

**Ms Ennis:** Does the Minister agree that New Decade, New Approach was the basis on which the institutions were re-established and that we need to see full delivery of the NDNA commitments by the Executive, the Assembly and, crucially, the British and Irish Governments?

**Mrs Foster:** Yes. We need to see delivery by all those involved in the New Decade, New Approach discussions. That was the idea behind the agreement; it was a comprehensive agreement that brought us back to the Assembly. I agree with the Member on that. It is now for those involved, whether they are our own Government, the Irish Government or the Executive, to make sure that the agreement moves ahead. It is for them to progress and move ahead with New Decade, New Approach.

**Mr Allister:** Does the First Minister think that we have seen delivery under New Decade, New Approach of the commitment to have utterly unfettered trade from Great Britain to Northern Ireland? Can she confirm, for the public's information, although this is probably a matter for her successor, that no Government legislation can be brought to the House without the consent of the First Minister and the Executive and, therefore, without the personal endorsement of the people in that position?

**Mrs Foster:** On the Member's last point, I confirm that any legislation that comes to the House from the Executive has the endorsement of the Executive and of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Regarding unfettered access, all the promises that were made about unfettered access have not been upheld. We are seeing the opposite; we are seeing fettered trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I hope that the legal case that he and I are involved in will bring an

end to that and will bring some clarity on trade, which, of course, was set out in the Act of Union in 1800. We hope that that will be the case.

### Good Relations: TEO Funding

5. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the funding awarded by their Department to promote good relations in the last financial year. (AQO 2037/17-22)

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will not have time to ask a supplementary question.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** OK.

**Mrs Foster:** Mr Speaker, with your permission, junior Minister Lyons will answer the question.

**Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** In 2020-21, funding of over £18 million was allocated to good relations by the Executive Office. It includes £12 million of Shared Future funding, which was allocated across Departments for the delivery of the seven Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) headline actions and wider good relations programmes. A further £6.6 million of Executive Office baseline funding was allocated to good relations delivery, supporting programmes such as the Minority Ethnic Development Fund and the District Council Good Relations Programme, and providing funding for the Community Relations Council.

2.30 pm

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

### Mother-and-baby Homes Inquiry: Update

T1. **Ms S Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the timeline for a report from the truth and recovery design team that has been charged with establishing terms of reference for an inquiry into mother-and-baby homes. (AQT 1301/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for her question. She will know that that work is being taken forward by Judith Gillespie and her team. They have set up a panel with a number of experts to engage with the victims so that they can moderate it in a way that means that it is truly co-designed. We look forward to engaging with Judith again to get an update on that ongoing work. No huge concerns about that process have been raised with me or, unless Judith tells me otherwise, with her. I hope that it will bring forward an inquiry of whatever type the victims want and need.

**Ms S Bradley:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. We know that much of the truth and many of the answers lie in documents and data held by other parties. What preliminary actions have the First Minister and deputy First Minister taken to secure that data and to secure land, which, unfortunately, may also be a requirement?

**Mrs Foster:** We have had initial discussions with some of the Church leaders and institutional leaders. Those were preliminary discussions on the scope of what we were trying to do. As well as the data held here — of course, if held within our Departments, it will be protected — we will listen very carefully to what the interdepartmental working group has to say about access to documents outside the

jurisdiction. The Member will know that there is grave concern about access to documents in the Republic of Ireland, for example, and we will want to hear what the recommendations are on that. Judith is engaging with her colleagues in the Republic of Ireland to try to tease out some of those issues. We will want all of those documents to be made available so that people can get to the truth and find out what happened during those terrible years.

### T:BUC: Tackling Sectarianism and Division

T2. **Mr Gildernew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the impact of the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy on tackling sectarianism and division. (AQT 1302/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** As the Member will know, this is a long-standing strategy from the Executive Office — before that, from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — to try to tackle some of the legacy sectarian issues that persist within our society. I have been really pleased to see the way in which our young people engage with the T:BUC strategy and the programmes that are rolled out from it, particularly the annual camps that are organised all around Northern Ireland to bring together people who would not ordinarily come together. I am sure that the Member is aware of the good work that takes place in Erne East, a very important part of Northern Ireland. I declare an interest: it is my home district electoral area. That is an example of the good work that T:BUC has facilitated over many years.

**Mr Gildernew:** I agree, Minister, that it is crucial work. Given that it is so crucial to building a shared future and, indeed, a better future, will you detail how the impact of the programme's interventions is assessed or measured at community level?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member. The delivery of the strategy is captured in an action under outcomes 7, 9 and 10 of our 'Outcomes Delivery Plan', which relates to a vision of a safe, welcoming and shared society that respects diversity and is a place where people want to work and invest. Progress towards achieving those outcomes is measured by a number of key indicators including increase in respect for each other, increased shared space and increased reconciliation. Results from the 2019 Northern Ireland life and times survey indicate that 66% of respondents believe that facilities in their area are shared and open to Protestants and to Roman Catholics, while 62% agree or strongly agree that their cultural identity is respected. We are looking at life and times surveys and at those indicators to see that the programme is making an impact.

### East Londonderry Enterprise Zone

T3. **Mr M Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans the Executive Office has to promote Northern Ireland's only enterprise zone in the East Londonderry constituency. (AQT 1303/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** The Member will know that that is more of a matter for the Department for the Economy, but I am happy to pass his comments to the Minister. I am sure that she will respond to him in due course.

**Mr M Bradley:** I thank the First Minister for that answer. Perhaps she could pass that on to Invest NI to encourage

it to show the same commitment as the First Minister has to East Londonderry and to visit my constituency a wee bit more often.

**Mrs Foster:** That is a matter for Invest NI, but I am sure that it will have heard what the Member said.

### Protocol: Destabilising for Northern Ireland

T4. **Dr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after wishing the First Minister all the best for the future, recognising that she will now join an exclusive club of former unionist leaders and suggesting that, when everything opens up, they get together for a bit of a pub crawl, to state whether, given that it was reported yesterday that Lord Frost is of the view that the protocol, in its current form, is not sustainable, the First Minister agrees that the protocol is not working for anyone in Northern Ireland and is, in fact, destabilising. (AQT 1304/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** I am not sure that a pub crawl is allowed under COVID restrictions, but I thank the Member for his comments. I noted Lord Frost's comments. In particular, he said that the protocol is unsustainable and not working for anyone. He gave good examples of what is happening in Northern Ireland. I welcome his words. We now need to see action on those issues, which, I hope, will happen in the near future. We have heard some very alarming stories recently, particularly about cancer drugs, and we want to get clarity on those issues as soon as we possibly can.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. One of the significant issues with the protocol is its likely impact on medicines and medical devices. Has she had any discussions with the EU? Has Maroš Šefčovič identified that as a problem that needs to be sorted out, or is he ignoring the issue?

**Mrs Foster:** After the 'News Letter' story on Friday, the European Union responded by dismissing it and saying that it was not an issue. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), which is responsible for dealing with those issues in the United Kingdom, disagrees with the EU and says that that is an issue. The EU refers to a grace period, and MHRA does not deal in grace periods. It deals with what is going to happen. Therefore, it is right that, particularly in relation to medicine, that issue — it is only one issue, of course; we all recognise that — has to be a priority. The well-being of the people of Northern Ireland depends on it. Cancer drugs, above all things, should not be held up in a political wrangle. Therefore, it needs to be dealt with very quickly.

### Protocol: Lord Frost

T5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given Lord Frost's recent visit to Northern Ireland, whether he recognised the huge difficulties that the obnoxious protocol is causing Northern Ireland plc and that the protocol is absolutely opposed by all unionists in Northern Ireland and needs to be replaced. (AQT 1305/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his question. Lord Frost acknowledges the political issues around that. He recognises that there is not one unionist in favour of the protocol and the way in which it has been implemented since the beginning of the year. I had the opportunity to

speak to him briefly when he was in Northern Ireland last Monday. He met businesses and listened to their very real concerns, and, as a consequence, we have his comments at the weekend, setting out clearly that he thinks that something needs to happen. Let us see that happening so that, instead of listening to words, we see action on the protocol.

**Mr Humphrey:** Thank you for that answer, First Minister. You will be aware of the attack on Jewish graves in Belfast City Cemetery a number of weeks ago. There is real concern in our small Jewish community in Northern Ireland about some politicians' utterances and some street activity. Will the First Minister join me in providing real support to our small Jewish community, particularly in Belfast?

**Mrs Foster:** I am pleased that the Member has brought up the issue. I tweeted about it last night. I find antisemitism sickening, especially when it is directed at such a small community in Northern Ireland. It is a vulnerable community because of its size. I noted that one of our foremost business people's premises were defaced in a really awful way at the weekend. It is incumbent on every person in the House, regardless of what they think of what is happening in the Middle East, to condemn and to be active in their condemnation of what is happening to our small Jewish community in Northern Ireland. I am sickened to the pit of my stomach that people have targeted our Jewish community in that way, and I ask the Member to take my best wishes to the community, particularly in North Belfast.

### PEACE PLUS: Applications

T6. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have any indication of when the PEACE PLUS programme is likely to open for applications. (AQT 1306/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** No, we do not have an indication of that yet. It is still in development. As the Member will know, the Department of Finance leads on Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) matters, but the deputy First Minister and I have met the chief executive about the programme. It will be a significant programme for many communities across Northern Ireland, and we look forward to it in the near future.

**Mr McAleer:** The Minister will appreciate that previous EU funding programmes have had a hugely transformative impact on promoting peace and prosperity. Does she have any assessment of the impact of previous programmes and, indeed, of the pending PEACE PLUS programme?

**Mrs Foster:** As I indicated, the Department of Finance leads on the PEACE PLUS programme. The deputy First Minister and I take a great interest in it, because it often augments other programmes. When we are trying to help a community, it is a cocktail of funding that comes forward but SEUPB is sometimes the largest funder. It is about transforming the communities and dealing with some of the issues that Mr McAleer's colleague Mr Gildernew referred to when talking about transforming society through the T:BUC strategy. We have indicated to the chief executive that we want it to be a transformative piece of work across Northern Ireland, and I hope that he agrees that that is the way in which it should work.

## Shackleton Barracks

T7. **Mr Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, while not wishing to sound overcritical, given that we are dealing with a pandemic, whether the First Minister can enlighten the House as to when we will see the promised hundreds of jobs at the 760-acre Shackleton Barracks site in his East Londonderry constituency. (AQT 1307/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** I think that I signed off an answer to a question for written answer from the Member very recently about that. The development at Ballykelly has been slowed down by the fact that the Heathrow expansion has been stalled by a planning issue. It was meant to be linked to the Heathrow expansion, and, unfortunately, that is stalled. I am sure that that has had an impact on the matter to which he refers.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Is there a clawback clause attached to the sale of the site?

**Mrs Foster:** I do not have that detail in front of me, but I am happy for officials to follow up with the Member on that issue.

## GB to NI Travel

T8. **Mr Harvey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given last week's announcement that, from 24 May, non-essential travel will be allowed within the common travel area, what steps will be taken to encourage people from GB to travel to NI in order to boost our tourism and hospitality sector. (AQT 1308/17-22)

**Mrs Foster:** Regarding travel in the common travel area, subject to advice and guidance, we have decided to remove the essential travel reasons requirement, retain the guidance on self-isolation and add two new exemptions to that guidance. People are now allowed to visit family and friends. We felt that that was a very important exemption, given the number of familial ties across the United Kingdom; indeed, many on the Executive acknowledged that. There is also an exemption for those who have already completed mandatory quarantine on arrival at a point of entry elsewhere in the common travel area and have then travelled directly into Northern Ireland. If you have already served your quarantine in London or Scotland, you can come on into Northern Ireland without needing more quarantine.

2.45 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up. Members, please, take your ease for a moment or two.

## Finance

### All-island Banks: Disinvestment

1. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Finance what engagement he has had with all-island banks regarding disinvestment in Northern Ireland. (AQO 2047/17-22)

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** Regulation of financial services is a reserved matter for the British Government, and there is a limited role that my Department can play. However, I engage regularly with

local banks and trade union representatives on local services and jobs matters.

I last called senior representatives from the local banks to a round-table meeting on 24 March, where I pressed them on the need to protect the services that they provide to citizens and businesses in the North and the jobs that go with them. Separately, I met the Bank of Ireland in February to discuss its planned branch closures. Earlier that month, I wrote to the CEO of NatWest to raise my concerns about the closure of Ulster Bank in the South and the impact of that on the staff in the North who service those operations.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Cross-border banks have long been a driver of our all-island economy, but some of those banks are disinvesting on both sides of the border. As the Minister mentioned, Ulster Bank has closed operations in the South. Bank of Ireland is closing branches in the North, including in Keady and Crossmaglen in our constituency. That disinvestment is made worse because financial services are not covered by the protocol. The Minister's Budget document made it clear that it is his Department's responsibility to lead on financial services. What is he doing specifically to protect the all-island economy against the damage done by banks scaling down their operations on either side of the border?

**Mr Murphy:** The Member has possibly mistaken my leading on financial services for leading on a matter that we do not regulate. We do not regulate the banks. That power lies in Westminster. I do not have the authority to dictate or control what those private corporations do. What I can do and have done is to raise issues of concern with them. It is also primarily an issue of concern for the Department for the Economy. I have met the banks. I have had a round-table meeting with them and pressed them on the need to continue services, particularly over the course of the pandemic. I have pressed them — indeed, the Bank of Ireland — on the loss of services in rural areas. There is an expectation that post offices or others can pick up those services when, clearly, in relation to benefits, that is not the case for a large number of them. There are real challenges.

Banks make commercial decisions in the interests of their corporations, but they have a responsibility, particularly in the challenging economic times that we face and given that, when they faced challenging times, it was the state, North and South, that bailed them out and kept them afloat, to ensure that they continue to provide services to the people whom we all represent, businesses and others. I will continue to engage with them in that regard in the time ahead.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Minister for letting us know that he has had discussions with the chief executive of NatWest. One of the major concerns that we have is around the desegregation process with the Ulster Bank and the fact that it is heading towards a greater merger with NatWest. Has the Minister had any discussions about the retention of vital back-office functions and jobs here in Northern Ireland? What can we do to retain them here?

**Mr Murphy:** Alison Rose, the CEO, assured me of the bank's commitment to support its customers and colleagues. She advised that Ulster Bank's business in the North is unaffected by the withdrawal of Ulster Bank from the South. An orderly phased withdrawal of Ulster Bank in



the South will take place over a number of years. There will be no new compulsory departures or branch closures from the businesses this year as a result of the announcement, and we will closely monitor that situation.

As I said, the regulation and the authority over the financial services lies in London, and in Dublin for those who are south of the border, but we will continue to engage and to press and remind these institutions that they have a responsibility to people and to businesses. They have to recognise that the globe is going through a very challenging economic time and that financial institutions have a part to play in that, as the citizens had a part to play when the financial institutions were in trouble.

**Mr Muir:** As the Minister will be acutely aware, many businesses are coming out of these restrictions heavily indebted as a result of the downturn in trade over the last year. What engagement has the Minister had with the banks? What message does he send to the banks about the need for them to show forbearance to enable those businesses to come back?

**Mr Murphy:** The very discussion that we had at the round table was about the need to continue to support the loan scheme that came from Treasury. I know that Treasury had been considering further flexibilities for paying that back as people began to earn, rather than attaching it to a time frame, and we continue to talk to Treasury about that. However, as I said, there needs to be that recognition that these are very challenging times, that businesses will need support to get back to full trading again, that it will be some time before that is achievable, and that the banks and other financial institutions have a role in that, just as we had a role in their difficulties.

**Mr McGuigan:** Further to the previous questions, has the Minister had any engagement with the Financial Services Union, which represents bank workers throughout Ireland, on the idea of a forum that will bring together key stakeholders, including the executive banks and workers?

**Mr Murphy:** Yes, I have. As well as meeting the banks, I met the Financial Services Union on a range of issues, including its call for the establishment of a banking forum to discuss the future of banking in the South and here in the North. I indicated that I was supportive of that in principle. My officials are considering the proposals for a forum and are giving it further consideration to understand the particular practicalities of how it might work here.

In addition, my officials are engaging with the Financial Services Union to further understand the position of the Irish Government. This is an opportunity for all stakeholders to get involved in the discussion to consider the key issues facing the local banking sector. I raised that concept at the recent round table with the banks and asked for their views on whether they would sit on the forum. Although they did not provide a clear position, and membership would be voluntary, I continue to press the local banks on the merits of such a forum.

## COVID-19 Funding for Businesses

2. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Finance to detail the total amount of COVID-19 funding provided to businesses since the beginning of the pandemic. (AQO 2048/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** COVID-funded support to businesses administered by my Department since the start of the

pandemic included the rates holiday, the £10,000 grants to small businesses, the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) and the three schemes that I recently announced to use up unspent funding. In total, my Department is anticipated to spend just over £1 billion in business support. For a Department that does not usually administer grant support to businesses, that is a tremendous achievement, and I thank Land and Property Services (LPS) for stepping up during the pandemic.

The Department for the Economy has spent £494.9 million on business support. Of that, some £200 million has been administered by the Department of Finance, bringing the total administered by my Department to over £1.2 billion. I know from talking to businesses how important all that support has been in sustaining jobs during the COVID crisis.

**Mr McHugh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. There is no doubt that there has been a huge scale of financial assistance to the business community. When will we expect the £5,000 and £10,000 grants to be paid out?

**Mr Murphy:** As I said, the Department is working through three schemes of business support. We expect that payments from that particular scheme should begin by the end of the month and flow through from there on in.

## Shared Prosperity Fund: Update

3. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. (AQO 2049/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** I congratulate the Member on her elevation in recent days. The launch date for the Shared Prosperity Fund has been continually pushed back. Although a prospectus has been promised by the summer, I do not expect to have any detail on quantum until the next Westminster spending review. We have been promised a governance role for the fund, but we have no detail of that role. My officials continue to push for involvement in the development and delivery of the fund and for respect for our devolved competence.

A pilot scheme for the Shared Prosperity Fund has been launched under the name Community Renewal Fund. The £11 million that has been set aside for projects here under that fund is considerably less than the approximately €70 million per annum that we previously received from comparable EU structural funds.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) plans to deliver the funding here directly, with little or no role for the Executive. It has also been indicated that the Shared Prosperity Fund may operate in that way. That would mean that our EU funding would not be replaced, which would leave a significant hole in our Budget and put MHCLG in competition with Departments and local government for projects here. That cuts across our devolved responsibilities.

**Ms P Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I know that he has been working hard and lobbying on behalf of our Executive to get that money through. Are there any early indicators of how those groups and the wonderful work that is being done in the community might suffer because of the lack of continuity in the funding?

**Mr Murphy:** There is such a dearth of information in that regard that groups that previously relied on that support have not necessarily received it. At the end of the previous financial year, we allocated some additional money to the Department for the Economy to continue schemes that they would have received money for under European funding because nothing was coming through at that point. We have an indication that £11 million is earmarked for here. That does not mean that we will get £11 million. In previous years, through comparable schemes, we received, I think, €70 million or whatever the comparable sterling figure for that was. It is a real area of uncertainty.

As you know, quite a lot of community groups and people who work in the voluntary and community sector and provide vital services have relied very heavily on EU funding. Our inability to give them certainty about funding is a real challenge. That level of funding has been lost, and the ability of the Executive to allocate EU funding against our priorities to make sure that it gets to where it is needed most has been removed. That means that groups such as that will be competing with groups right across Britain for a much lower level of funding. It is a very uncertain and unacceptable place to be. I will continue, with my Welsh and Scottish counterparts, to raise that with Treasury at every opportunity.

**Mr O'Toole:** The governance and lack of information on the Shared Prosperity Fund is totally unacceptable. What is the latest update that the Minister has had from the Economy Department on the shortfall of funding in relation to Invest NI? It was in receipt of significant European money. Towards the end of last year, it was reported that it was around £60 million in deficit as a result.

**Mr Murphy:** We allocated some funding to the Department for the Economy before the end of the previous financial year to cover some of the gaps in relation to some job intervention schemes. I am not certain whether it was directed through Invest NI, but I think that the figure was in the region of £40 million. I will double-check that and communicate it to the Member.

As the Member knows, the Department for the Economy has a standstill budget for this year. That presents significant challenges. Although we have been able to fully allocate the money for the economic recovery programme that it has developed, which, undoubtedly, will involve job promotion and apprenticeships, and, I am sure, Invest NI, there is no guarantee that we will be able to replace any of the other funding that Invest NI relied on in previous years. It is, as you said, unacceptable. It is very challenging. We do not have certainty about that position. What has been indicated so far falls way short of what we were previously in receipt of. That applies also to Agriculture, which has identified a shortfall of some £14 million in relation to what it previously received under EU funding.

### 3.00 pm

**Mr Blair:** Before I ask a question, Mr Speaker, maybe you would permit me a moment or two to wish Paula Bradley all the very best on her elevation. Paula and I are, of course, former council colleagues, or adversaries, whichever way you look at it. We would not say that, but I genuinely wish her well.

Will the Minister confirm whether his Department, solely or with the Department for Communities, is working with

councils to organise the bids for the Community Renewal Fund?

**Mr Murphy:** No, we are not. Due to the way that the Community Renewal Fund has been set up, we have been told that the only area that the Executive can have an interest in is transport because they are the sole authority responsible for public transport here.

The second theme, if you like, of the Community Renewal Fund is town centre renewal. Even though Communities would have a natural interest in that, we are told that it is not an area where Executive bidding can be allowed. Culture and arts is the third theme, and, again, we have been told that that is not a function of the Executive.

I am sure that if the councils or anyone else come to us we will provide whatever information and assistance that we can, but it is very unclear how the fund is functioning. The Executive have been restricted to one aspect of it.

### Social Value Policy

4. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the role of his Department's Innovation Lab in the development of a new social value policy. (AQO 2050/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** The Department of Finance Innovation Lab delivered a one-day insight lab on Wednesday 5 May 2021 that was designed to encourage consensus on a road map that will deliver the Department's aim of increasing social value in public procurement.

The event engaged with participants and sought thoughts on time frames, targets and scoring with a view to informing a road map to an effective and workable policy that can be implemented quickly. Participants considered case study contributions that were provided by invited keynote speakers from across these islands. The Innovation Lab report will inform a paper that will be presented at the next Procurement Board meeting, which is on 9 June.

**Ms Brogan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I commend him for his ability to find new and innovative ways of working, in this case to generate employment and opportunities that would otherwise not have been there. When does the Minister expect the new social value policy to come into force?

**Mr Murphy:** I already had a discussion with officials who were involved in and managed that from the procurement side. As I said, the intention of the Innovation Lab is to collate and compile the outcome of the event to inform a paper, which we are already developing, to bring to the Procurement Board on 9 June. In anticipation that that gets through the Procurement Board, my intention is to then bring it to the Executive at the earliest opportunity.

We have changed the way that we do procurement policy in order to bring matters like this to the Executive for their endorsement. That gives us a much stronger place in each Department rather than procurement simply being a policy issue for the Department of Finance. I look forward to that meeting with the Procurement Board to get this important area of work advanced and to then getting Executive endorsement to make sure that there is a consistent approach across all Departments and arm's-length bodies (ALBs).

## Prison Officers: NICS Support

5. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on actions taken by the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) human resources (HR) following the two reports by the Department of Justice on its review of the support services for serving and retired prison officers reports. (AQO 2051/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** I believe that congratulations are due to the Member also. There has been a lot of elevating in recent days. I wish him well in his new role.

The Member's question refers to reports that were commissioned by the Minister of Justice. Officials from the Department of Justice are engaging with officials in NICS HR, which is the human resources capacity in the Department of Finance, on the implementation of the relevant recommendations in those reports.

Implementation falls to the Department of Justice, and that Department is best placed to report on progress. However, I understand that Department of Justice officials have been engaging with NICS HR and have identified as a priority a recommendation to embed an HR team within the Prison Service. NICS HR already has some staff embedded within the Prison Service, and work on developing that further is progressing well. It is envisaged that the embedded team will be in place by the summer of this year.

**Mr Beattie:** Thank you, Minister, and it is almost as though you looked at my supplementary and gave me the answer straight away. It was about embedding staff within the headquarters of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) because it is unique in the way that it delivers its service compared with other parts of the Civil Service. Will you extrapolate a little on what you just said? Do we know how many people we are likely to put in as part of that team at the grade that was recommended?

**Mr Murphy:** As I said, there already are a number of people allocated to HR within the Prison Service, but I think that the report's recommendation was for a bespoke service. As the Member said, there are unique features there that require their own particular service.

I do not have the detail. The Department of Justice and the Department of Finance, between them, will have that. When the team is in place, it will look at the HR function in other Prison Service operations to make sure that it has a comparable approach that builds on best practice elsewhere.

**Mr Lyttle:** Will the Minister provide an update on the ending of the use of the term "inefficient" by NICS HR when referring to prison officers who are absent from work due to mental ill health? Has the Department of Finance scoped the cost of the recommendation for an extension of eligibility to former prison officers for support from the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust?

**Mr Murphy:** On the first issue that the Member raised, the absence management policies have been merged to create one new sickness absence management policy that does not have the word "inefficiency" in its title. The word is referred to only at the dismissal stage, and the reason for that is that the grounds for dismissal are linked to rules set out in the NICS compensation scheme, which uses the term "inefficiency". As soon as the trade union consultation

is complete and the Departmental Solicitor's Office has completed a final review of the revised policy, a suite of revised letters and guidance will be published. That is expected to happen by no later than the end of June this year.

On the second matter, I will have to make some enquiries and come back to the Member in writing.

**Mr O'Toole:** On the broader point of Civil Service reform, Minister, we know that there are profound issues. Reports, including the Northern Ireland Audit Office's report last year, keep telling us that. We expect a full package of Civil Service reform. When can we expect to see that?

**Mr Murphy:** We are progressing that as we speak. Of course, the Department of Finance will take the lead on that, but it applies to all Departments. I expect that the Public Accounts Committee will follow up on the Audit Office report with a report of its own. Officials have been before the Public Accounts Committee to give information and evidence of progress on those matters.

We are in the middle of a substantial recruitment programme, and we want to push forward a substantial apprenticeship scheme across the Civil Service. All of that will contribute to an influx of new members and, hopefully, a much more diverse input into the Civil Service so that it reflects society as a whole. We will continue to progress that, and I will keep the Member and the Committee on which he sits updated as we do so.

## Budget 2021-22: Loss of EU Funding

6. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the impact that the loss of EU funding has had on the 2021-22 Budget. (AQO 2052/17-22)

**Mr McCrossan:** I also congratulate Paula Bradley and Doug Beattie on their recent elevations and wish them well for the challenges ahead.

**Mr Murphy:** Due to the nature of EU funds, the financial framework in which they operate and the uncertainty around replacement funding, it is difficult to quantify the loss of EU funding for 2021-22. Despite the British Government's assurance that farm payments would be funded in full, due to the approach that they have taken, DAERA projects a £14.4 million loss in farm payments for 2021-22.

The continued lack of information on the Community Renewal Fund and the Shared Prosperity Fund means that we are unable to make a complete assessment of the reduction in spending power in relation to the other funds. However, the limited information that we have, coupled with the delivery mechanism for these replacement funds, tells us that the result is likely to be detrimental to the Executive's Budget, and, if the Shared Prosperity Fund is delivered in the same way, that detriment will be amplified in future years.

The Department for the Economy was allocated £42.5 million by the Executive in the 2020-21 January monitoring round to help to mitigate the impact of reduced income from EU structural funds in 2020-21.

**Mr McCrossan:** Thank you, Minister. What are you doing to ensure that the replacement funding for cross-border projects is determined and allocated locally, rather than being decided on by and distributed directly from London?

**Mr Murphy:** It depends very much on what London intends to distribute that funding for. As the Member knows, Peace funding will continue, and we are consulting on PEACE PLUS. That takes in the old Peace funding, which is at the Peace IV stage, and INTERREG funding, which was specifically for cross-border projects, and merges them into one fund. The new fund will continue for five or six years, and there is potentially over €1 billion in that. We will, of course, continue to engage with the Government in Dublin on the Shared Island Fund, which will also be beneficial in cross-border terms.

Where some of the existing projects that were funded under EU funding schemes do not fall within PEACE PLUS or the Shared Island Fund, we will continue to engage with the Treasury, as I have been doing with my Scottish and Welsh counterparts, to establish the fact that the Executive should have a role in doing that and that spending here should be against Executive priorities and not against levelling-up priorities that are decided in Whitehall. We have a unique set of circumstances here in relation to cross-border projects, which are in two jurisdictions. We need to respect that, and we continue to engage with the Treasury on that basis.

**Dr Archibald:** Our budgets are under ever-increasing pressure as a result of cuts to the block grant and, as has been described, the loss of European funding. Both of those, I might add, are the result of decisions that were taken in Britain. Will the Minister outline the medium- to long-term impact of the COVID pandemic on the Budget?

**Mr Murphy:** Last year, as the Member will know, we received a significant additional allocation of £3.3 billion of COVID funding, some of which we have been able to carry over. This year, however, we are struggling with a flat-cash rollover Budget, and, so far, we have received in the region of £900 million of additional COVID funding, which we allocated largely in the Budget that was announced in the last number of weeks. We are engaged in an exercise to allocate about £300 million of that so that Departments will, early in the year, have a sense of what they have to spend.

That is as much, as we have indicated, that we will get. It will be very challenging against the backdrop of an expected general economic downturn. In the early stages of reopening, people will expect some increase in economic activity, but, over the longer period, it is expected that there will be a downturn. That will mean less revenue for a lot of Departments as well. It will be a very challenging time. We are glad of the additional money that we have received, but I have no doubt that the approach of a one-year Budget that does not give us any additional cash will be very challenging for the Executive.

## Community Renewal Fund

**7. Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has engaged with the Department of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the community and voluntary sector and local councils regarding the £11 million funding that has been allocated to Northern Ireland as part of the UK Community Renewal Fund. (AQO 2053/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** The Community Renewal Fund is the pilot for the Shared Prosperity Fund, which is intended to replace EU structural funds. I have discussed both funds extensively with Ministers from the Cabinet Office, the

Treasury, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the NIO and from other devolved areas. I have also had frequent engagement with local government and third-sector organisations. My most recent meeting was with Michael Gove at the Cabinet Office on 12 May. Prior to that, together with the Economy and Infrastructure Ministers, I met the MHCLG and NIO Secretaries of State on 10 March.

The £11 million has not been allocated to us as the question suggests. The MHCLG plans to deliver it directly, using the Internal Market Act 2020. It is also not new money; it is spending power that should have been given to the Executive to deliver. That approach cuts across the responsibilities of the Executive. The role that is envisaged for the Executive is to apply for a limited range of the funding and to comment on applications. The £11 million also falls far short of the amount that we would need to replace EU structural funding, by which, in past years, the Executive have benefited from some £70 million per annum. On what we know so far about those funds, Brexit will have cost the Executive a significant sum.

**Mr Beggs:** Earlier, the Minister seemed to indicate that his Department has not been consulted about the fund, yet local government is seeking to be consulted. In the rest of the United Kingdom, however, local government is mentioned as a strategic partner in relation to coordination and in ensuring that collaborative bids are made and opportunities are maximised. Will the Minister go back to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to seek to ensure that there will be collaboration in Northern Ireland with local partners in order to maximise the opportunity that is being made available to us?

**Mr Murphy:** That is what I would expect the Department to do. We have not received that type of information. The functions of local government in Britain are different from those of local government here; they are much more limited. We have been told that there are three themes, but the Executive are able to express an interest in only one of those themes — transport — and the other areas of town centre renewal and arts and culture are outside of the Executive. We are happy to work with local government and to make sure that, with the limited funding that is available and our limited input to it, we can maximise whatever we can from that. We are happy to continue to engage with Departments in Britain because we have been trying to get as much information on those issues as we can for some time now. We will continue to press for that information and for a different approach. Ultimately, even if we maximise what is possible under the current arrangements, it will still be way short of what the Executive had under EU funding.

## 3.15 pm

**Mr O'Toole:** Does the Minister share my amusement at the irony of Members of parties who backed Brexit standing up and decrying the loss of EU funding that communities and local government in this place are facing as a result of Brexit? Does he agree with me that one of the few opportunities that there is is the Northern Ireland protocol, which gives us access to two markets, including the European single market of half a billion people?

**Mr Murphy:** I do not recall it being written on the side of the bus when it was starting on the Brexit tour that we

were going to end up as net losers as a consequence of that exercise, even though, as the Member will, I am sure, recall, many of us warned of a detrimental outcome.

There are significant opportunities. There are expressions of interest from different parts of the world, given our unique position in the British markets and the European markets. It is time to get beyond the noise about Brexit and the protocol, resolve any issues that arise from it in the best interests of businesses here — there are supply chain issues across the world that have nothing at all to do with Brexit that are impacting on here as well — and get on with availing ourselves of the opportunities that are presented by the situation with the protocol and our unique position between both markets.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Paul Frew. The Member will not have time for a supplementary.

### Dormant Accounts Fund: Applications

8. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Finance how many groups applied to the dormant accounts fund. (AQO 2054/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** The purpose of the dormant accounts fund is to build capacity, resilience and sustainability in the third sector. The purpose of and criteria for the fund were informed by a significant consultation and engagement process with the sector, and it has been co-designed to reflect that aspect of local needs. It includes supporting new and innovative ways of working, supporting cross-organisational working and developing the skill sets in organisations to allow them to thrive into the future.

There were 211 applications to the fund between 12 January and 30 April. The fund does not have a closing date and remains open. To date, the success rate of applications has been relatively low, because many of them received have sought replacement programme funding and not met the capacity-building requirements. My Department is working with the National Lottery Community Fund to promote the overall purpose and to encourage new and resubmitted applications. The fund is not a programme replacement fund. Rather, it is designed to meet the gaps that traditional funding models cannot address.

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

### Civil Service Pay Offer

T1. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance, given that, in a previous answer to him about the pay offer that was made to civil servants for this year and next, he quoted a figure that was higher than the 1% that was offered, to confirm that that figure included progressionary pay that was due to be awarded regardless and that the offer to those workers is actually 1%. (AQT 1311/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** What I can confirm is that a pay offer has been made to the recognised trade unions, and a pay bulletin was issued to all civil servants last month. It is a two-year pay offer and represents a 4.8% increase on the Civil Service pay bill over two years, at a cost of £44 million. It will make the Civil Service a living-wage employer, fulfilling the New Decade, New Approach commitment. It focuses on the lowest paid, fulfils the commitment to multi-year pay offers, where that is

possible, and improves terms and conditions for staff. It is the best that can be offered in very difficult circumstances, against a flat Budget from Westminster. Importantly, the Executive agreed not to follow the pay freeze imposed for 2021 by the Westminster Government on most civil servants in England. The pay offer is a difficult balance between recognising civil servants for their work and managing public money carefully in the face of the most challenging economic position for many years.

**Mr Carroll:** Thanks to the Minister for his answer. Minister, my understanding is that that 4.8% includes progression and that 60% of workers will not see any real-terms increase in their pay. I also understand that the Tories include progression as part of pay offers as well, as a way of disguising meagre pay offers or, indeed, pay cuts. I expect workers to reject the offer, and if they do, they will have my full support. If that is the case, what will the Minister's response be to those workers?

**Mr Murphy:** I will await the response. I have had discussion and dialogue with a number of trade unions. Some of them have been very receptive to what has been offered, while others have taken issue with it, and that is their right. They all know from my discussions with them over the year that I would like to be in a much better position in order to make a much better pay offer to them. Given what is available to us, however, we have done our very best. We also got the Executive to break with the pay-freeze policy that has been established in Westminster. The previous time that a pay freeze was introduced in Westminster, it went on for a number of years, and it took effect here as well. We have broken with that tradition, and a number of the unions recognise and appreciate that. I will wait on the outcome of the consultation. It is up to the members to decide their approach, and we will respond accordingly then.

### Social Value Legislation

T2. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Finance, following his response to Nicola Brogan's question about social value policy, to give an indicative time of when he anticipates social value legislation being introduced in the Assembly. (AQT 1312/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** The social value measures about which I was responding to the Member for West Tyrone were in relation to procurement policy matters, which we are progressing through the Procurement Board and will then take to the Executive. I have indicated a long-standing desire to do social value legislation as well to complement and reinforce that. Obviously, with the pandemic and the emergency approach, on all of the other issues that all of the Departments were facing, a lot of our planned legislation has been kind of shunted sideways. We are trying to pick that up, and I am hopeful that we will have time left in the mandate to get social value legislation devised and through the Assembly. I think that what we are doing with procurement will have a significant impact, but I would like to see that reinforced by legislation.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** If a social value Act proceeds through the Assembly, as, all being well, we all hope that it does, how will the Minister ensure that each Department takes seriously its responsibility for procurement commissioning and tendering?

**Mr Murphy:** Part of the reconstitution of the Procurement Board, even outside of legislation, was to recognise that we wanted to bring on practitioners to get the best possible policies that were well tested through dialogue on the board and also to make the approval of procurement policy an Executive matter rather than just a matter for the Department of Finance. It was previously a Department of Finance policy, and we tried to encourage other Departments, down through to their arm's-length bodies and agencies, to respond accordingly. We agreed that an Executive endorsement of procurement policy gives it a consistency through each Department, so we will expect each Minister in the Executive to ensure that something that they endorsed is followed through right down through the Department. We hope that, when we get this policy agreed and endorsed by the Executive in this next short while, we will see some real change. It is a progressive policy and is starting out where it needs to start to have impact, but its ambition is to go much further over the time ahead.

### Civil Service Recruitment: Derry

T3. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister of Finance, after welcoming his recent announcement of a recruitment process to fill 500 executive officer 1 and executive officer 2 positions in the Civil Service, to confirm whether any of the posts will be based in Derry. (AQT 1313/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** As I said, the recruitment process has just started, and it is part of a much wider programme of reform in the Civil Service. We also want to push forward with an apprenticeship scheme, which, I think, will also be beneficial. I do not have the precise figures, but I am told that most of the jobs will be located between Belfast and the north-west. That will then be complemented by the regional hubs that we are promoting, which means that people who are considering jobs in the Civil Service, particularly those jobs that are headquartered in Belfast, do not have the same consideration of having to travel five days a week from more peripheral areas around the border in and out of Belfast every day. That makes those jobs more available to them. I hope that, over the course of all these matters coming together, we see a much greater transition in the make-up of the Civil Service — in gender, in disability and in sexual orientation — so that it is a Civil Service that truly reflects the entire society that it serves.

**Ms Mullan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. As someone who travels from those parts, I know that that would be very welcome for many. Minister, will you consider putting in place measures to ensure that those from the most disadvantaged areas and background are given the best opportunity to avail themselves of the new employment opportunities?

**Mr Murphy:** We have been making a substantial push with the recruitment exercise that is ongoing to make sure that there is a very widespread knowledge of that, that people are encouraged to apply and that the Civil Service makes it very clear that it is an equal opportunities employer, welcoming applications from across society. I think that the apprenticeship scheme will be important in looking to people who come from sectors or geographical areas from which they would not have traditionally considered applying to the Civil Service and in people realising that there are opportunities for them there. Through doing that and, as I said, through changing the work practices in the

Civil Service estate, we can get a much more diverse Civil Service that reflects society.

### Childcare Sector: Support Schemes

T4. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will try to provide support to the group within the childcare sector that was not eligible for any of the rates-based support schemes, albeit those under £15,000 net annual value (NAV) received £10,000, while those over £51,000 NAV received £25,000. (AQT 1314/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** No matter how we devise one of these schemes, you will always find that people have fallen outside them for some reason. I had a discussion with LPS this morning, and that issue was raised in relation to that specific part of the childcare sector. It is very difficult to devise schemes to include everybody. We are now operating on a very limited amount of COVID money that is left. We have other areas, including multiples, that we have not been able to address to date, and we are trying to get support to them. We recognise that other supports have been available for some sectors as well. We are trying to take all that into account. However, I will continue to look at where we find gaps and see what we can do in the time ahead. We are coming to an end of that type of support scheme through the rates body. As I said, we discussed that this morning. I cannot promise anything, except that we will continue to look for where the gaps are and whether there is anything that can be done for them.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. My supplementary question is on the LRSS. Some businesses in my constituency have received £3,000, £5,000, £6,000 or £8,000, but they are now being asked to pay it back because of errors in your Department. Those businesses needed that money to pay bills. They have paid the bills, and now they are asked to pay it back. What do you say to them?

**Mr Murphy:** Out of the hundreds of millions of pounds allocated over the course of that scheme, something like 1.7% was paid out in error. That it is a very high success rate for a scheme that was done quickly by an agency that is not a grant-giving agency but a revenue intake one that repurposed itself to do that. I accept that, in doing that at the pace with which it was done, it was inevitable that there were going to be some mistakes. LPS will work with people. If people feel that they are wrongly being asked to return money, they can appeal. Some of those cases have been revisited and the payments upheld. I advise them, in the first instance, to engage with LPS and appeal if they feel that they are being wrongly charged.

Some of them may have wrongly received LRSS but are actually entitled to some top-up, so you may find that one payment will cancel out the other. They should engage with LPS to find out whether it is the case that LRSS was wrongly applied to them, and they might be able to avail themselves of an additional scheme that will compensate for that. I advise them, in the first instance, to engage, but there has been a very small percentage of error in the scheme, which was huge and was done at a very significant pace.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Christopher Stalford.

**Mr Stalford:** I am fine. I was not aware that I was on the list.

## LRSS: Backlog

T6. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the fact that, like many other Members, he continues to receive a significant amount of casework in relation to the localised restrictions support scheme, for an update on the status of the scheme, particularly the backlog in payments. (AQT 1316/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** My Department is working through that backlog as quickly as it possibly can. It is good practice anyway, but, after discussions with the Audit Office, staff were obliged to reassess as they went along, to make sure that where errors were made, they would, at a very early stage, try to recoup the money lost. Therefore, they have written to a number of businesses about that.

I am not certain that there is much of a backlog at this stage, but I can find out for the Member what payments are due and valid for people. The main question in recent times has been the attempt to recoup some of the money. As I said, it represents some 1·7% of the total, which shows a significantly high level of success. As I said in response to the previous question, the scheme was developed at a fast pace, and people have been very grateful for the support on the ground. However, where errors have been made, it is a difficult situation for businesses. LPS will work with businesses to make sure that the error is corrected. If the money has to be recouped, arrangements will be made. However, they can also offset that, so that if the person is due another payment, perhaps from the top-up scheme for those who did not get LRSS, they should be fitted in there instead, LPS will ensure that it is taken from that, rather than the business having to find the money to repay it.

There are arrangements that can be worked through with businesses, but, in relation to a backlog, I am not aware that that is now a significant issue, but I will check with the Department and if there is any further information on that, I will get back to the Member.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for that answer. When the LRSS ceases, businesses will continue to operate in a situation in which their profitability and overall operations will be restricted because of continuing COVID regulations and restrictions. Will the Minister reassure us that that situation is being looked at to find solutions?

### 3.30 pm

**Mr Murphy:** The LRSS is defined by regulations that allow money to be paid out only when businesses have been advised or instructed to close or are severely impacted and restricted. I think that everyone recognises that businesses will struggle to get back to full trading. Undoubtedly, the restrictions and guidance on social distancing and all that will be in place for some time and will have an impact on businesses. As I said, the LRSS is able to pay money only if businesses are forced to close or are severely restricted.

We have fully funded the Department for the Economy's economic support and recovery package to try to assist businesses in other ways, and, of course, measures such as the voucher scheme are coming through. There will also be a rates holiday for quite a lot of businesses next year, so a lot of people in retail and hospitality will have two full years without having paid rates. There is continued

support for businesses, but not through the LRSS. That is obliged to stop once businesses reopen.

**Mr Speaker:** A number of Members are not in their places. I call Declan McAleer. You may have time for only one question.

## Levelling-up Agenda

T10. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the levelling-up fund, given that previous answers referred to, amongst other funds, the UK Community Renewal Fund. (AQT 1320/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** It is not so much a levelling-up fund. The expectation is that the Shared Prosperity Fund will be set against a levelling-up agenda. Most people who understand British politics will understand that the levelling-up agenda is focused largely on the north of England, where, undoubtedly, there is economic deprivation. There are significant areas of deprivation here and, I am sure, in Scotland and Wales as well. In any dialogue that I have had with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers, we have all felt that the levelling-up agenda is unique to England. If projects here have to bid for support on the basis of those criteria and in competition with projects in England, it will put us at an unfair disadvantage.

The Shared Prosperity Fund prospectus has not yet been released and is expected over the summer. The Community Renewal Fund is, if you like, the pilot scheme for that. If it continues in that vein, it will be detrimental to projects here. I do not think that we will receive anything like the same level of support that we would have had under EU arrangements.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Members. Time is up. Can Members please take their ease for a moment or two?

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier today, after the close of the Matters of the Day, I intervened to ask you to examine the comments of Mr Carroll. Having listened to the tapes, I am totally satisfied that he did not, as I alleged, use a swear word. I completely misheard him, and I have apologised to him. I also apologise to the House for wasting time in that regard and withdraw any suggestion that he used a swear word.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for taking the time to check the record. I also thank him for, as I understand it, contacting Gerry Carroll directly to explain all that and, indeed, informing my office that he intended to set the record straight in the Chamber this afternoon.

Members should take their ease for a moment or two.

## Committee Business

### Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

**Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** 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 January 2022, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 20/17-22].*

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

**Mr McAleer:** This important legislation will facilitate the resumption of payments to Downpatrick and Down Royal racecourses, which have been unable to receive allocations from the horse racing fund in recent years. That has been caused by a change in the managing operator at Down Royal and the need to ensure that the fund complies with subsidy control regulations. The Bill seeks to address those issues to ensure that payments can once again be allocated to the two racecourses.

While the Bill is quite focused in its scope, it raises wider issues that may need to be considered by the Department on resourcing the fund, making payments and, potentially, making other entities eligible to receive payments. In order to ensure that the AERA Committee has the scope to give due regard to specific aspects of the Bill and other wider issues that it presents, the motion is submitted to extend the Committee Stage until January 2022.

**Mr Speaker:** No other Member has indicated that they want to speak on the matter. Normally, the Committee Chairperson is called to close the debate.

**Mr McAleer:** Thank you for the debate today [*Laughter.*] In order to give adequate scrutiny to the Bill and given the fact that the Committee has quite a tight schedule, particularly as we commence scrutiny of the Climate Change Bill, we respectfully request an extension of the Committee Stage of the Bill until January 2022.

**Mr Speaker:** A valiant exercise.

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 January 2022, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 20/17-22].*

**Mr Speaker:** Members can take their ease for a moment.

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

## Private Members' Business

### Medicines and Medical Devices: Unfettered Access

**Mr Buckley:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly recognises the importance of retaining unfettered access to the United Kingdom internal market for medicines and medical devices; notes that 98% of the medicines used in Northern Ireland are supplied from Great Britain; recalls that the barriers to trade in this area, imposed by the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, are yet another reason why the protocol should be replaced; rejects the establishment of regulatory and customs controls on medicines moving between Great Britain and Northern Ireland; highlights that, if established, these arrangements would add cost for businesses and public services, restrict supply and jeopardise patient care across Northern Ireland; regrets that some GB firms have already severed ties with the Northern Ireland market; expresses grave concern that existing grace periods are due to end on 1 October 2021 and 1 January 2022 in the absence of a solution; and calls on the Minister of Health to work with his Executive colleagues to resist strongly disruption to east-west trade for medicines and medical products in all circumstances.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Business Committee has agreed to allow one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr Buckley:** I speak on this most serious of issues in the hope that Members across the House will accept the spirit of what I say and the serious nature of the debate. The issue of medicines and medical devices goes to the heart of why I believe that the Northern Ireland protocol is harmful to Northern Ireland citizens. If it does not highlight the protocol's harmful insanity, I fear that nothing will.

The perilous implications of imposing the protocol on Northern Ireland have been well documented. First and foremost, we are all too aware of the economic disruption directly consequent from the implementation of the arrangements. Like many other Members, I have been contacted by hundreds of people giving examples of the burdens placed on consumers, businesses and everyday supply chains. In this brief period, we have witnessed a snapshot image of the long-term unworkability and unfairness of the new arrangement, which, ultimately, impacts on trade across all sections of the UK and draws a dagger across our tried-and-tested market.

Beyond the economic impact, this roughshod arrangement has been thrust upon Northern Ireland with no support from the unionist community. Nothing on the ballot paper or in the result of the 2016 referendum made the protocol inevitable or desirable. Best of all, those in the House who are champions of the protocol portray it as a compromise and a necessary evil to keep the land border open. That is to the detriment of the health of every one of our citizens. What sort of compromise is it? How does accessing medical supplies pose a risk to the EU single market?



Historically, Northern Ireland's model of supply has relied on the free movement of supply from Great Britain, and, to that end, it comes as no surprise that 98% of the medicines and medical devices used in Northern Ireland are imported from or via Great Britain.

**Mr Stalford:** I am grateful to my friend for giving way. The Member knows that the debate takes place in a context. One of the contexts is that, as a consequence of COVID, we have had to cancel more than 16,000 surgical operations and 320,000-plus people in Northern Ireland are on a waiting list. Does the Member agree that denying those people medicines and access to medical equipment is an act of cruelty?

3.45 pm

**Mr Buckley:** The Member makes a valid point. I will come to that issue later in the debate.

With 98% of medicines to Northern Ireland coming from the GB mainland, you will not find a clearer example of how the protocol is harmful to every citizen in Northern Ireland.

**Ms Ennis:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Buckley:** I will give way shortly. When the grace period ends, all medicines coming into Northern Ireland from Great Britain will be treated as goods entering the EU from a third country and will be subject to additional batch testing and certification. From 1 January 2022, when the grace period ends, all the medicines used in Northern Ireland will have to comply with the EU's falsified medicines directive. That affects the packaging of medicines, and the same requirements will not apply to products marketed in GB. Medicines in Northern Ireland must comply with the European licence and requirements set out by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) while those in GB do not. In addition to those checks, Northern Ireland will allow for EU regulations on vaccines and clinical trials from which we have benefited enormously in recent history. If ever there has been a case for the need for closer alignment on medicines — from paracetamol to vaccines for COVID — it is quite clear that Northern Ireland has benefited immensely.

I pay tribute to the Minister and the vaccination team, headed by Patricia Donnelly, on the efficiency in which the programme was rolled out in Northern Ireland. Can you imagine the disaster if the grace period did not apply and Northern Ireland did not have access to those life-saving vaccinations?

**A Member:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Ennis:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Buckley:** I will give way shortly. I have to get through this. I will have time to come back to you.

We have not seen the impact that the protocol will have on medicines and medical devices because it has been covered over. I welcome the fact that there has been a grace period, but the impact has been masked. When that ends, suffering will be inevitable because of the Northern Ireland protocol. All these measures and barriers to supply for the proposed differentiated arrangements for Northern Ireland will require segregated, complex and costly supply chains.

Throughout the pandemic, we were made abundantly aware of the benefits of unfettered access to the national distribution and supply network through the success of the UK COVID vaccination programme across all regions. That would not have been possible without the existence of the grace period. Some 98% of supplies to the Department of Health come from the mainland and are valued annually at £600 million. Despite that, the protocol would create small and segregated NI-only pools of products with the risk that separate licensing, labelling and customer requirements will prevent medicines, made to GB specifications, being sold in Northern Ireland. My colleague Pam Cameron and I have met many of those GB companies, and they fear the additional burden that this will put on their supply chains. Many of them, I imagine, will look at Northern Ireland as no longer being a place in which they will do business. The British Generic Manufacturers Association (BGMA) has made it clear that that will prevent identical products from being sold to GB and NI, meaning businesses will have to duplicate resources and supply lines, and firms may need to build extra warehousing and hire more staff to ensure that medicines comply with both UK and EU regulations. It simply is not viable in the long term. Given the small margins, that will simply not be sustainable. Some GB manufacturers report that up to 90% of medicines could be at risk of being withdrawn.

Alongside the cost of creating a Northern Ireland-only pool of products, the protocol is likely to impact and prohibit the treatment of specialist illnesses. A headline in the 'News Letter' last week told of specialised cancer drugs not being allowed access to Northern Ireland as a result of the protocol. That is harmful in so many ways, yet parties in the House call for its rigorous implementation. In today's debate, I want Members from those parties to recognise the folly of their words.

**Ms Ennis:** I thank the Member for giving way. If the DUP is genuinely concerned about the impact that Brexit will have on health, why do I not hear it talking about the new barriers that EU healthcare workers are facing and the impact that those barriers will have on staffing levels? Why do I not hear the DUP talking about the cross-border health directive? Surely those issues will have an immediate impact on our health service. I would like to hear you talk about that, Mr Buckley, instead of the motion that is in front of us and the inaccuracies that it presents in an attempt to deflect from the protocol. The issue for health is not the protocol. Rather, the fundamental issue is that Brexit is bad for health. That is a Brexit that you voted for —

**Mr Buckley:** I have given [*Inaudible.*]

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order.

**Ms Ennis:** — that you championed and that you still support today.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order, Members, please. I remind the Member that interventions are meant to be brief and that, if you wish to do so, you can put your name down to make a speech.

**Ms Ennis:** I was finishing. He did not have to interrupt.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** You still have the floor, so it is back to you.

**Ms Ennis:** Thank you. I will finish my point. The protocol is not the issue that is facing health. The issue is that Brexit

is fundamentally bad for people's health. That is a Brexit that —

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for her intervention, and now I will continue.

**Ms Ennis:** — the DUP championed, that the DUP voted for and that the DUP still supports today.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order.

**Mr Buckley:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order. Everyone, please calm down. I gave the Member an opportunity to finish her intervention. I hand back to you, Mr Buckley.

**Mr Buckley:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not in order that, when they give way for an intervention, Members are entitled to take the Floor again when they wish to do so?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Whenever Members give way, they give the Floor to whomever they give the Floor to. Courtesy would normally result in their getting it back after a brief time. You are running out of time, Mr Buckley.

**Mr Stalford:** Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, can you clarify that it is standard custom and practice in the House that interventions should be brief and that that intervention was not brief?

**Ms Ennis:** He would not stop interrupting me.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order, Members. That is enough commenting from sedentary positions. I have said already that interventions should be brief.

I call Mr Buckley.

**Mr Buckley:** I will happily debate any of the issues that were mentioned by the Member, but today I am talking about medicines and medical devices, 98% of which come from GB and are directly impacted on by the Northern Ireland protocol. The Northern Ireland protocol does not look at those patients with care and consideration. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. Only last week, a constituent told me that the manufacturer of the MS drugs that they need has claimed that the supply line will be disrupted because of the protocol. That is in addition to the threat to the supply and choice that is available to local health and social care services, to access to clinical trials and to exciting new developments in the production of medicines, including vaccine supply. Those will be threatened or, at the very least, slowed down. The reality is that, although the protocol was championed with false promises —

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

**Mr Buckley:** — the issue of medicines and medical devices must be addressed, the protocol must be removed, and we must get to a stage at which this place is not held to ransom by the European Union and the protocol.

**Mr Gildernew:** I welcome the opportunity to make some brief remarks outlining the Health Committee's consideration of the issue, before I speak as my party's health spokesperson. At the outset, I point out that the

Committee has no agreed position, but I will outline its consideration of the matter to date.

The Committee received a number of Brexit briefings from Department of Health officials, who were joined by Executive Office officials at the most recent briefing, on 15 April 2021. During that briefing, the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer outlined how the pharmaceutical industry currently benefits from a grace period for medicines, which was introduced at the start of January to give the industry a further 12 months to prepare for changes. The Committee has scheduled a further briefing on Brexit-related issues for late June. At that point, it expects a detailed update on the progress that the Department has made on dealing with the issues that have been raised.

I will now make some remarks as the Sinn Féin spokesperson for health. There is no good Brexit for Ireland, North or South. The majority of people here voted against it. Our membership of the EU was a fundamental component of the peace process and formed the foundation of the Good Friday Agreement. The protocol is not perfect, but it mitigates the worst of Brexit. It is an internationally agreed and binding treaty that prevents a catastrophic hard land border.

Brexit itself is the problem. When he moved the motion, the Member talked about drawing a dagger across the throat of long-established markets, but that is exactly what Brexit has delivered. We would not be here debating this issue if the British Government did not go down a path of a hard Brexit with maximum disruption and divergence. The Tories, enabled by the DUP, chose this hard Brexit, and you must both own it. Innumerable opportunities were available to minimise divergence in medicines regulations, as well as in trade and many other areas.

The Members opposite, whose party brought the motion today, may have been fooled, beguiled or bought by the lies of a Tory Government that no more have your interests at heart than they have mine or ours, but we are not fooled, and nor should any Member or party in the House be fooled by the faux outrage and false narrative contained in the motion. Instead, we must concentrate on dealing honestly with the issues that Brexit is raising and will continue to raise. We should recognise that the supply of medicines and medical devices is a complex undertaking, featuring a series of interlinked processes across Europe and the world. Indeed, it is the reality that 70% to 80% of Britain's medicine supply comes via a European border. We need to maximise the potential of the grace period and work in good faith and honestly, Members, with all partners, including Europe, in that effort. Burying our heads in the sand will not help in that regard.

If we want to talk about threats to our health system from Brexit, we could talk about, as has been mentioned, the serious long-term staff shortages in hospitals and care homes that are being exacerbated as a result of the additional red tape around recruiting EU healthcare workers. We could talk about the loss of the cross-border healthcare directive, which is already having an impact, and I am sure, Members, that you are all hearing of constituents who are being impacted by the loss of that directive. Those are also looming crises to our health service, but they are because of Brexit alone and are nothing to do with the protocol. The fact is that Brexit is bad for our health. It is not the protocol that is the problem here; it is the Brexit that the party opposite called for,

worked for and connived with English nationalists for against the democratic wishes and interests of our people here in the North.

I call on everyone here today —.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Gildernew:** I will.

**Mr Allister:** In this distortion of reality, does the Member not recognise that Great Britain has free access to, for example, Tagrisso, which is a treatment for lung cancer? Northern Ireland does not, and why? Because of the protocol. Not Brexit, but the protocol, because the protocol keeps us within the ambit of the European Medicines Agency.

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

**Mr Gildernew:** I thank the Member for his intervention, but surely the Member knows that Britain imports 70% to 80% of its medicines from Europe, and up to 90% of its medicines comes from the wider global supply chain. Medicines are not a British issue. I heard reference earlier to the vaccination programme. AstraZeneca, a key vaccine that has helped here, was developed in conjunction with a German and European company, manufactured in Belgium and funded by the European Union. That is where medicines supply and healthcare sit in the world today.

I call on everyone here today to reject this attempt at misinformation and misrepresentation and to reject the motion. Let us set about the real work, Members, of rebuilding our health and social care sector, and let us stop wasting time with the cynical political opportunism and fearmongering from the Members across the Chamber.

**Mr O'Toole:** First of all, I am somewhat disappointed that none of the amendments to today's motion — I know that several were tabled — was accepted. They would have allowed a greater richness of debate, and people had put down alternative wordings.

**Mr Stalford:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it appropriate for a Member to question the decision of the Speaker's Office on the tabling of amendments?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Member is perfectly correct: we are not here to debate amendments that were not chosen. I ask Members to debate the motion in front of us.

**Mr O'Toole:** OK. To be clear, Mr Deputy Speaker, I did not question any judgement. I expressed regret that they were not accepted. That is not the same thing, and it is disingenuous of my colleague from South Belfast to state otherwise.

#### 4.00 pm

Today's motion concerns movement of medicines and medical devices. It is an entirely legitimate subject for debate. I am in no way suggesting that the Members opposite should not debate these issues. However, there is a somewhat insincere decision to frame the issues as having been produced by the protocol. It is as if, somehow, the protocol is *sui generis*: it came from nowhere. It dropped from space. Perhaps someone in Brussels got in a room with the Alliance Party, the SDLP, Sinn Féin and

the Irish Government and they decided to come up with a protocol out of nowhere. The protocol is a response to —.

**Mr Allister:** *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr O'Toole:** You overdo —. From a sedentary position, the Member for North Antrim somewhat exaggerates our influence.

The protocol is a response to decisions made by the UK Government. They made repeated decisions to break away from the regulatory ambit of the EU single market and to do so in a way that has prompted unfortunate consequences that go far beyond the Northern Ireland protocol. The protocol simply relates to movement of goods. It does not relate to services. Before I come to the specifics of medicines, it is important to say that the vast majority of our economy — 70% — is services. Services are not covered by the protocol, and that is having real-world consequences for healthcare.

The cross-border healthcare directive has been mentioned. The Minister's Department has written to trusts in Northern Ireland to tell them that, if they have any staff engaged in cross-border healthcare work — for example, nurses or doctors who accompany children to get cardiac care in Dublin, or people involved in providing cancer care in the north-west — they now need to be registered on both sides of the border. A vast range of complexities and difficulties has been thrown up by Brexit. Brexit is a disruption of regulation and of how we do a range of things. It is unfortunate, and I wish it were not happening.

It is important that we get a resolution to the issue of medicines and medical products. We are in a grace period, which was agreed long before the end of the transition period last year. It is worth saying again that the transition period should have been extended; that would have given us a long time in which to deal with this and many other issues to do with Brexit, not just in relation to goods and other matters affected by the protocol. The grace period that the Joint Committee agreed late last year is welcome, and I know that the Joint Committee monitors and observes how we deal with movement of medicines and medical devices. It is a legitimate question. It is legitimate for us to engage with the Joint Committee, and I am sure that the Minister's Department will do just that. I am not ideological about this, but it is incorrect and wrong to portray the protocol as the root of all evil when it comes to these matters.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Toole:** I will briefly give way.

**Mr Allister:** I am sure that the Member has read the protocol. If he has read annex 2 of the withdrawal agreement, he will know that paragraph 20 imposes 11 EU regulations, all of which control medicinal products, and that paragraph 21 imposes five EU regulations that deal with medical devices. With or without grace periods, that is the heart and core of the protocol *vis-à-vis* medicine. That will not change unless the protocol goes.

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

**Mr O'Toole:** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Member is right that those directives are applied in Northern Ireland. He wants to upend and remove the protocol and is engaged in legal and political pressure

to do so. That would be a very bad thing to happen. The protocol established a Joint Committee, joint consultative working groups and a whole range of other means of engagement with the European Commission and the UK Government for applying the protocol. That has already happened.

If the Member's solution to everything is simply to turn over the table and to throw everything in the air, what good will that do? I say that seriously to some Members opposite. I respect the fact that many of them dislike the protocol on principle, and I do not demean their concerns about it. I have many concerns about Brexit. I am deeply upset that constituents of mine who are EU citizens have to apply for settled status because we do not enjoy freedom of movement in this part of the world any more. We all have to deal with unfortunate consequences of Brexit. I regret the fact that doctors and nurses in Northern Ireland are having to register with Southern authorities simply to provide basic healthcare. These are difficult issues thrown up by Brexit. The right way to deal with them is to engage in productive, constructive —

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

**Mr O'Toole:** — engagement via the Joint Committee. We will not be supporting the motion.

**Mr Chambers:** This debate would not need to be happening if there were no protocol nor a regulatory border down the Irish Sea in place. It is worth placing on record that a number of parties in the Chamber were quite happy to run down to Dublin and go across to Brussels for smiling photo opportunities, and to call on both the Irish Government and the EU to implement the protocol without delay. They were unashamed cheerleaders for the protocol. Indeed, in a letter that the leaders of the Alliance Party, Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Green Party signed and sent to the Prime Minister in April of last year, they advocated for an EU office in Belfast:

*“to ensure the implementation of the Protocol on ... Northern Ireland which you negotiated”.*

The DUP leadership initially welcomed the concept of a regulatory border down the Irish Sea, describing it as a “gateway to opportunity”.

**Mr O'Toole:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Chambers:** No, thank you.

This opened the door for Boris Johnson to push ahead. By the time that the DUP realised the consequence of its initial welcome and began back-peddalling, it was too late to stop it.

My family have operated a village supermarket for nearly 50 years. We can already see the creeping effects and consequences of the protocol. A large, local wholesaler, which is part of a chain that operates right across Great Britain, previously stocked a huge range of own-label products covering just about every requirement that a shopper could have. Those were quality products with a budget price marking. A shopping basket filled with them would represent a huge saving on a family's weekly food bill. These products are no longer being brought into Northern Ireland because the supplier cannot justify the cost of relabelling the large number of food products in the range to meet EU regulations. That is just one example of

the long-term damage being caused to the supply chain of goods coming into Northern Ireland. I could quote a number of similar stories around various products. There is not a single retailer or wholesaler in Northern Ireland that has not been negatively impacted on by the protocol.

This debate, however, is about the supply of life-saving and pain-relieving medicines and medical devices. This issue is extremely worrying. No matter what your opinion on Brexit or the protocol, no one should underestimate the potential impact on our citizens' health and, more importantly, on our NHS and the public's ability to purchase over-the-counter medicines, as we approach the end of the grace period on 1 January 2022 and in the years that follow.

The annual budget for medicines used in Northern Ireland is around £600 million. That figure does not include medical devices. Undoubtedly, the price of medicine will increase because of the protocol. Even a 10% increase in costs to the NHS would inflict a major blow to its budgets. It is money that could be better directed and better used to assist the much-needed restructuring of the NHS and its ability to tackle and reduce the unacceptable waiting lists, which were brought about by the curtailment of health funding over many years by parties in the House. For instance, new drugs to be used in the treatment of cancer could become available for use. While those will become immediately available to patients in Great Britain after professional assessment, the same drugs are not guaranteed to become available in Northern Ireland.

**A Member:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Chambers:** No, I need to finish.

My party has suggested a mitigating solution: that the UK Government legislate to place a duty on suppliers based in Great Britain to provide their goods to all regions of the UK internal market. We think that that would prevent a situation in which producers of medicines and medical suppliers decide, following a grace period, that they will supply their goods only to customers in GB. I know that the Minister and his officials are working hard to pre-emptively cover a range of outcomes brought about by the protocol, from temporary product shortages to major price increases. This is the result of a flawed political deal between the UK Government and European Commission and a clear illustration of why it should be scrapped. Using the safety and welfare of the people of Northern Ireland as some sort of bargaining chip is shameful. We need the certainty that a commitment to a full derogation will provide, and we need it now.

On numerous occasions, I have heard —

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

**Mr Chambers:** — Sinn Féin say that the problem is Brexit. It is not. The protocol is the reality, it is with us now, and the problem that needs to be sorted is the protocol.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I regret that the Alliance Party cannot support the motion, despite the fact that there is much in it that we agree with. It rightly raises a serious issue, but, as is so often the case with the EU referendum, it falls short of providing serious solutions.

Before I proceed, I thank Cathy Harrison, the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer, and her team. As the Chair of the

Health Committee said, she has come to the Committee many times to outline the serious issues that they are grappling with, not least during a global pandemic.

While I commend the proposer of the motion for raising the issue, which requires resolution, we again see it raised in a way that is primarily about pretending that the matter is not about Brexit. Specifically, it pretends that the matter is not about the Brexit that was, inevitably, brought about by the DUP's insistence on seeking, at every conceivable turn, while its MPs held the balance of power at Westminster, to distance us from our major trading partner. The DUP likes to talk about our major trading partner being Great Britain, but, from an all-UK perspective, our major trading partner is the European Union and, specifically, the European single market. The DUP fully and intentionally sought to put up barriers to that trade. We are living with the damage.

**Mr Stalford:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Bradshaw:** I want to make a bit of progress. Thank you.

Part of that damage will inevitably involve barriers to cross-border cooperation in health, yet the DUP's only solution is to try to impose a border for goods on the island of Ireland. The existing regulatory body adds to the potential damage to our health system in everything from longer-term workforce planning to mutual recognition of qualifications.

The issue before us is serious. As I said, there is much in the motion with which I agree. While we should not forget that the protocol creates significant opportunity for the local pharma industry and for investment in pharma locally, because it can freely export to both Great Britain and the European Union, it is not realistic to expect a full redirection of medicine imports by October 2021 or January 2022. Therefore, although I fully concur with the final lines of the motion, they do not explain how what they propose may best be done.

Let us turn to solutions. I agree that we will need longer than until October to find an adequate way forward, a fact that is widely accepted for food. The grace period for medicines will need to be extended. We should not use that grace period merely to seek more time to realign supply chains; we need to be better than that.

There are ways in which we could try to eliminate the barriers to imports of medicines from Great Britain, the most obvious of which is for everyone in the Chamber to face the fact that that will involve the UK Government and the European Union coming together and agreeing alignment on standards and regulations. That re-agreement, which is evidently being blocked by the UK Government, would provide at the very least a model on which we could restore the relatively unfettered east-west movement of vital goods. That could be copied for pharmaceuticals. Failing that, we should, as the bare minimum, seek to have HSC Northern Ireland — in other words, our NHS — recognised under a trusted trader agreement in order to demonstrate that there is no risk of a leak into the European Union of medicines that are to be used by the public health service.

We want to see solutions. That will require us to lay identity politics to one side and to engage in practicalities on behalf of everyone here in Northern Ireland. Alliance Party representatives will meet the Cabinet Office this week to discuss those solutions. That is where our focus needs to be.

**Mr Stalford:** There is an apocryphal story about an old soldier at the end of the Second World War who did not realise that the Japanese had surrendered and kept on fighting in the jungle for years afterwards. When I hear myself and Matthew O'Toole talk about Brexit, I sometimes think of that as an allegory.

We can fight until doomsday about this issue, but I do not wish to refight the 2016 referendum.

**4.15 pm**

Following on from what another colleague from South Belfast Ms Bradshaw said about the erection of barriers, I think that she will find that one of the major reasons why we are in this situation is the callous and spiteful decision, some time ago, of the European Union to invoke article 16 as a means of seeking to deny the people of this country access to EU vaccines. The Health Minister rightly said:

*"Everyone thought that that work was progressing well until the EU triggered article 16 over vaccines. That unnerved and unsettled people, and it has increased the level of concern that we are seeing, especially from the smaller suppliers of medicines and more intricate medical devices."*

It is quite clear where the belligerence in this situation has come from, and it has not come from the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland or from the Government of the United Kingdom.

**Mr Sheehan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Stalford:** I want to make a few points, and then I will give way to you.

This situation demonstrates that the Northern Ireland protocol is bad for your health. Some 98% of all medicines and medical equipment coming into this country come from Great Britain. In that context, it is important that we reflect on the scale of the health challenges that we face. Of course, for the past 14 months, the health service has been focused almost entirely on tackling the threat of COVID-19. As a consequence, 16,000 surgical procedures have been cancelled in this country. More than 320,000 people are on waiting lists, which is one in six of the population. We need the resources. The Minister will say that he needs the money, and I accept that, but we need the resources. It is not simply money and staff that we need but medicines and medical equipment.

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Stalford:** No, I do not want to hear from a Brussels cheerleader right now, Mr Dickson, thank you.

Anything that places barriers in the way of our people getting access to the medicines and medical equipment that they need is a bad and dangerous thing. I give way to Mr Sheehan.

**Mr Sheehan:** I thank Mr Stalford for giving way. There are two fundamental problems. The first is the DUP's support for Brexit. That has been well rehearsed, but I suggest that there is also an existential threat to unionism at the very top of the British Government. It is encapsulated in the quote from Dominic Cummings:

*"I do not care if Northern Ireland falls into the effing sea".*

**Mr Stalford:** I am here to discuss health rather than any existential threats to the Union, but I certainly believe that it would be good to see a bit more unionism put back into the Conservative and Unionist Party. That is a challenge for the Prime Minister to meet over the coming days.

Anything undertaken to deny our people medical supplies is not merely the act of some overzealous bureaucrat; it is a deliberate act of cruel aggression and belligerence towards the people of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Stalford:** I will give way very briefly.

**Mr Dickson:** The act of belligerence against Northern Ireland, if there was one at all, surely happened when the DUP sat down, wrecked Mrs May's decisions and decided to follow the hardest of hard Brexits under the current Prime Minister.

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

**Mr Stalford:** Those who defend the protocol are supporting the denial of medicines and medical equipment to the people whom they represent. The Member may shake his head as much as he likes and choose to parrot whatever line comes out of Brussels, but the exact consequence of this protocol is that people in East Antrim will not have access to the medical equipment or supplies that they need.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I ask that all remarks be made through the Chair.

**Mr Stalford:** I beg your pardon, sir. The European Commission's cheerleaders can attempt to sugar-coat it any way that they like, but that is the reality on the ground. Northern Ireland is being used by the European Union as a football to kick in order to punish the United Kingdom as a whole for daring to vote to leave its club. That is demonstrated by the fact that 20% of all checks taking place at the EU's borders are conducted on goods crossing the North Channel, a region that represents well below 1% of the European population. What does that demonstrate about the overzealous way in which the European Union conducts itself? We saw it when the EU sought to deny people access to vaccines, we see it in the brutal and heavy-handed way in which it is implementing the checks at the North Channel, and we see it in this latest example of seeking to deny our people medicine and medical equipment.

**Mr Gildernew:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Stalford:** I cannot: I have 40 seconds. We have already been told by the Health Minister that a request to extend the grace period on medicines has not been agreed. What possible justification can there be for such belligerence beyond spite? The people looking in will see not only the spiteful attitude that has been adopted by the European Union but the roll-out of vaccines in this part of the world as demonstrating the success that our country has had in comparison with the approach that European Union officials have taken on healthcare matters.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I will say the opposite of what Christopher said: Brexit is bad for your health. Colm Gildernew, Sinéad Bradley and, indeed, Matthew O'Toole, in so many words, said that as well. For all its faults, the protocol is there to mitigate the worst impacts of Brexit. I want to correct

Christopher: most people in the North did not vote for Brexit. I do not want to reopen that debate, but I want to put that on record.

The protocol is an internationally agreed and binding treaty. Therefore, the notion that 45 votes in the House can do away with it is misleading.

**Mr Stalford:** We will see.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** It absolutely is.

I want to bring some facts into the debate. Scotland does not have a protocol, yet, according to Scotland's Health on the Web, there are 37 supply shortage notices in the supply of drugs, including antidepressants and medicines for epilepsy and other such illnesses. It has been completely ignored that the red tape is a result of Brexit, not the protocol. In fact, some British companies have, indeed, relocated to Dublin in order to ensure that there is free flow and that it is via Britain. I think that that is being missed, although I saw that Pam had put something up that differed from what Jonathan said in his outline. The notion that suppliers of medical devices in Britain face many new barriers to trade needs to be challenged, because it is misleading. To be frank, it is hyperbole. Yes: there will not be automatic certification, but there are compliances that need to go through. The fact that that has been omitted — sorry: it has not been fully omitted; at the end of his speech, Jonathan acknowledged that, because of grace periods, the east-west supply has not been impacted yet. However, he then went on to outline the worst-case scenario.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. I understand, from the logic of the Member's remarks, that Brexit is primarily the problem in the debate. However, does she accept — I have not heard it yet from the party opposite — that the Northern Ireland protocol, in its current form, affects that market far beyond any other element of society in Northern Ireland, with 98% of its market being on the GB mainland? Does she accept the protocol's problems with regard to that aspect?

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

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Thank you. Again, the Member is misleading the House, if I can say so: some 70% of drugs come via Britain; they do not come from Britain. With respect, Jonathan needs to read his research papers.

The issue was the same in the debate about agriculture and businesses. Again, here are some facts: a Manufacturing NI survey found that the majority of businesses accepted the protocol and mitigations. Only 18% of them believed that it should be thrown out completely. That is a fact.

I believe that the Member was at the Committee when the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer, Cathy Harrison, attended. I also acknowledge the work that she and her staff are doing. They are doing absolutely everything.

Even the British Government, in which the Member put so much faith until they shafted him again and again and again, have asked for an extension to the grace period in order to get things through.

Without the protocol, things would therefore be really bad. I understand that, ideologically, the Member has to jump up and down, but, realistically, without the mitigations,

things would be much worse. On that basis, we will not be supporting the motion. The Member will not be surprised to hear that, because he has already heard Colm say it.

**Mr McGrath:** I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. It provides a timely opportunity to remind the DUP and the hard Brexiteers of the responsibility and accountability that they have for the Northern Ireland protocol. Let us look at the facts. The DUP pushed for a hard Brexit in 2017. At its party conference, the then DUP leader, Arlene Foster, said that the DUP would prevent any Brexit deal that would “decouple” Northern Ireland from the UK. That was when the DUP was a kingmaker, but it became a time of intransigence, belligerence, arrogance and telling the Prime Minister how DUP MPs took their tea. It was a time of problem-finding and solution-dodging.

In early 2018, thanks to the DUP intervention, the UK Government rejected the backstop proposal. Good work there, lads. That belligerence continued through 2018 and culminated in the line:

*“There cannot be a border down the Irish Sea ... The red line is blood red.”*

DUP intransigence, belligerence and arrogance continued over subsequent years until, in October 2019, it accepted Boris Johnson’s proposal for a regulatory border in the Irish Sea covering goods and agri-food. To sweeten the deal, PM Johnson offered additional funding for Northern Ireland: a little bit of a buy-off. It was as though the people of the North could be bought and sold, like so many rolls of Mr Johnson’s wallpaper.

The motion tells us that the Northern Ireland protocol was “imposed” on us and must “be replaced”. Has the DUP learnt nothing? The DUP pushed for the hardest Brexit. It rejected every single deal that was going. It was intransigent, belligerent and arrogant with the UK Government. I will take a moment to ask DUP Members this: just exactly what did you expect? What would have been a positive outcome? The protocol is a result of Brexit. The DUP is responsible for the protocol. You are accountable for the protocol. You danced to the tune of a Member for North Antrim while looking to future elections, and you gave in to the unelected bloggers who called on you to make Northern Ireland unworkable until the Irish Sea border was removed. Violence returned to the streets of the North, and then the DUP called for the Chief Constable to resign and called into question the rule of law and order.

The motion before us notes that grace periods are due to end:

*“in the absence of a solution”.*

I suggest to the signatories to the motion that the motion is not a solution. It is evident that there are still outstanding issues with the protocol. Those issues are technical and not political, however. The parallels between the DUP’s attitude to the protocol and to the First Minister are really quite telling. It is evident that it is not in solution-finding mode with the protocol.

**Mr O’Toole:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGrath:** Yes.

**Mr O’Toole:** The Member mentions solution-finding mode. Some of us on this side of the House are often told that we

are not as committed as we should be to making Northern Ireland work. Does he not agree with me that the irony is that, in this year, which is important to certain Members of the House, we have unique dual market access, including to half a billion members of the EU single market, and that those who want to make Northern Ireland work should focus on maximising that opportunity?

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

**Mr McGrath:** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome that intervention, which shows a positive outcome that the protocol can deliver. If we were forward-thinking and forward-looking and were out there embracing every opportunity that there is across the world to try to sell ourselves as being ideally placed to be able to work the systems and to be able to deliver jobs and prosperity for the people of the North, it would be a good thing, but all we get is negativity, negativity and negativity from across the Chamber.

An investor would probably run a mile rather than provide jobs for the very people whom you are supposed to be representing.

#### 4.30 pm

The lesson needs to be learned and learned well: intransigence, belligerence and arrogance from the DUP placed us in this position. Those who tabled the motion may well have been able to operate a coup and remove their party leader, but intransigence and arrogance will not remove a framework from an internationally agreed act of withdrawal. Let us get the technical problems addressed and leave the politics to the side. We support the part of the motion that states that we all need to have access to medicines, but we do not support the way in which it is proposed to deliver that.

**Ms Flynn:** Although the point has been made a couple of times in the debate already, it is fair to say that no one in the Chamber wants to see any disruption to our medicines and medical supplies. You, Jonathan, will know from the Committee that it is an issue that we are all aware of. The problem with the motion is its essence and content. It ignores the glaring reality of why we are at this point. Members across the way have made the point that it is as a result of the protocol, but we are not debating the issue of unfettered access to medicines and medical devices as a result of the protocol. As has been said, the reality is that Brexit is the problem. Brexit is the point. We have been brought to where we are now because of Brexit. The protocol emanated from Brexit. Brexit was the catalyst. Language is changing. When Cathy Harrison gave us a briefing at the Health Committee, she talked about long-term change and a new normal. We have heard all those comments being made. The long-term change that has been identified and to which the industry is trying to adapt has been a result of the process that has flowed from the Brexit referendum.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. I understand that some Members across the House do not want to take my word for it, but what about the words of Mark Samuels, the chief executive of the British Generic Manufacturers Association? He said:

*“Due to the Protocol’s interpretation, the situation has forced our members to review the viability of their ongoing medicines portfolios for Northern Ireland. Without a solution immediately, some manufacturers report that up to 90% of medicines could be at risk of being withdrawn.”*

Is that not an acceptance that the protocol is a serious issue?

**Ms Flynn:** I thank the Member for making that point. I want to bring my remarks back to the word “solution”.

We hear about the threats and the 90%. We need to focus on medicines disruption. Carál referenced it earlier in relation to Scotland. The disruption that we see is not unique to the North. If it is not unique to the North, logic tells you that it is not unique to the protocol. Carál mentioned the Scotland example. A committee has been set up to monitor the availability of all medicines across England. As recently as 14 May, that committee revealed that the latest shortage that has been reported is for fluoxetine, which is an antidepressant. The shortage exists for England, Wales and us in the North. It cannot be said that the protocol is causing those shortages; it is bigger than that.

Cathy Harrison has briefed the Health Committee on a number of occasions about the impact that Brexit is having on medicines and supply. Members will know that, every time, we have asked what is being done to address those problems. That is the point that we need to get to. We know that the mitigations thus far have ensured minimum disruption to patients and citizens, and we know that many of the issues that were raised were about the readiness of traders and the short grace periods. It also has to be said that the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer stated that the majority of those issues have been resolved and that they are working through them, albeit on a case-by-case basis, and that, importantly, they have a further enhanced surveillance system in place. That is the important thing that we need to be talking about and keeping checks on. We heard about the potential for slow access to new medicines and delays to the introduction of variations in licensing. The Chief Pharmaceutical Officer has made it clear that that has been given top priority. More importantly, it is part of the ongoing talks between the British and European Union negotiating teams. That is where you will get progress and movement.

We heard about the large programme of work that is being undertaken by our Department of Health, the CPO, the Department of Health and Social Care over in England and by HMRC. An enormous amount of work has been done to reduce the risk to our supply chains. The language that the CPO used at the Committee was that all that work that has been done and is still being done is standing us in good stead in our understanding of supply chains.

We know that our medicine supply chain is being reorientated as we speak, and there is no change in that. That is happening as we speak. We are now working towards this phase of a new normal for a wide range of partners in the industry. The pharmaceutical industry is a broad family, and it is looking at highly complex supply chains from around the world. They are looking at different ideas but are having to make decisions, and they are making decisions already around transporting to the South of Ireland from the North and direct models into the North

as opposed to via Britain. That is work that they are used to doing. This is a complex business. Yes, the changes are having to take place, but the important thing for us as MLAs, and people were saying how our constituents might suffer —

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

**Ms Flynn:** — as a result, is that we really need to be careful with our language in the Chamber. Until we see the evidence and the outworkings that our citizens are being impacted, we have a responsibility to be really measured and to focus on progress and solutions.

**Mr Dickson:** I oppose the motion, because the Alliance Party did not want the protocol. It is not our protocol; it is the DUP’s protocol. We know why that protocol came about. It is the responsibility of a party that chose extreme Brexit, and that is where we are. However, we are a pragmatic party when it comes to issues such as those in the motion. We want to highlight the solutions. Others have been talking about solutions. This has been a debate of two halves: those who are not interested in solutions and those who are interested in promoting solutions. I am clearly on the side of wishing to promote a solution to the problem that we have had and that is set out in the motion. The motion totally fails to outline a meaningful course of action. Furthermore, it fails to set out any realistic way of addressing the problems and issues that we face.

The Alliance Party was first among the parties to engage with the Cabinet Office to find solutions to the protocol. Our North Down MP, Stephen Farry, our Brexit spokesperson, has been engaged extensively on this since the election in 2019. He has been engaging directly with the UK Government, highlighting the issues for the people of Northern Ireland but, crucially and importantly, working on solutions. Dr Farry was one of the very first to float, for example, the UK-EU veterinary agreement to ease Brexit friction across the Irish Sea — an idea that has gained considerable traction across the political landscape, even among DUP Ministers. Dr Farry was one of the first to highlight the potential problems that we might see with medicines in Northern Ireland when the grace period drew to a close. As many have mentioned, the vast majority of medicines into Northern Ireland come from Great Britain, but the fact is that many of them are manufactured in the EU. The grace period on the implementation of rules around medicines imported from the single market has been welcome and should be given more space. However, we must keep medicines flowing long-term. That is in everyone’s interest. I believe and have confidence that the UK Government, sitting down with its partners in the EU, will be able to achieve that.

What will not resolve the problem is continued blatant scaremongering. As local representatives, we should engage in good faith and constructively to achieve that resolution. I am delighted that the Health Minister is here to listen to the debate. I want to hear in detail what engagement he has had and what practical activities he has undertaken with the Joint Committee to resolve these problems. There is one person in the room who can tell us exactly what is going on. I do not believe that he will scaremonger; hopefully, he will set out some of the practicalities that he and his Department have been working on to resolve the issues.



Perhaps a trusted trader scheme could be a solution, as medicines do not normally go directly to patients but are prescribed. Essentially, I see no risk of medicines ending up outside Northern Ireland after arriving from the other parts of the United Kingdom. On wider customs issues, the UK Government have invested in the UK Trader Support Service to reduce friction and manage red tape. Businesses are already managing mitigations. We should give them space to support that happening, not trying to undermine that work by scaremongering. We need to support businesses to help them seek stability and reduce frictions. The reality is that the protocol is here to stay. Even Mr Stalford, who engaged with me earlier in the debate, told 'The Nolan Show' that it could be here to stay. Those were his words.

The UK Government have decided that a hard Brexit for the rest of the UK is worth it, so what is the alternative to the DUP proposal? Brexit and the protocol were not the outcomes that my party wanted. Clearly, the backstop, which was vetoed by the DUP, would have provided a much better outcome, but the DUP sank that, which is something that they should reflect on. People are tying themselves in knots, trying to reconcile the fact that they supported a hard Brexit and all the complications that, they were warned, it would bring to Northern Ireland.

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

**Mr Dickson:** They are also trying to blame others. I look forward to hearing the Health Minister's practical and workable solutions, and I want to hear what he has to say about his engagement to deliver that for Northern Ireland.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call Jim Allister. He will have the remaining four minutes.

**Mr Allister:** There should be some reflection on the number of minutes given to those in favour of the motion as opposed to the number of minutes given to those who are against it.

The motion is a moment of truth for the rigorous implementers of the protocol — Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Alliance Party — because they are the people who demand rigorous implementation. We are seeing what rigorous implementation means for their constituents and for mine. Under the protocol, the person who is suffering from lung cancer cannot, unlike his fellow citizen in the United Kingdom, have access to a vital life-saving drug like Tagrisso. Why?

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** I will not give way because I will get no extra time.

Why is that? Because the protocol places us exclusively under EU law and within the orbit of the European Medicines Agency, which has not approved that drug. Therefore, the hapless people of Northern Ireland, courtesy of the protocol and thanks to the rigorous implementers, are in a position where a life-saving drug like that cannot be afforded to them. I hope that the rigorous implementers are proud of themselves —

**Mr Sheehan:** On a point of order.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order. Point of order, Mr Sheehan.

**Mr Sheehan:** On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is it in order for Members to peddle misinformation? My colleague made the point earlier that the problem with medicines also relates to Scotland; it is not an issue that is related to the protocol. The Member in the corner is clearly blaming it on the protocol. Is it in order for a Member to do that?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Member has put his point on the record, but I have no information to say that what Mr Allister is saying is not accurate.

**Mr Allister:** I make the point because it is absolutely accurate *[Interruption.]* The people in Scotland have access to Tagrisso. Why? Because they are not bound by the iniquitous protocol. The people of Northern Ireland, including the people in west Belfast who might be suffering from lung cancer, will not have access to it, thanks to the protocol and its rigorous implementation, which Mr Sheehan and others support *[Interruption.]* I trust that those who vote for the rigorous implementers will see what rigorous implementation means. It means that they put their ideology above their constituents' health. That is what it comes down to: above their health. Shame on them for taking that attitude.

4.45 pm

However, it does much more than that. As I said when I intervened earlier, 16 critical EU regulations and directives are implemented by the protocol. That means that never, ever, under the protocol, can any public representative from Northern Ireland have any say in shaping, changing or amending any of them. The transfer of sovereignty that has happened under the protocol means that those laws, which touch on medicines — nothing is more critical to our people — can never now be made in Belfast or London but are to be made in a foreign jurisdiction that is subject to the oversight of a foreign court. That is the protocol in action. You see it in action in what it is doing to our health. It is a death-delivering protocol for cancer patients —

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

**Mr Allister:** — and that is courtesy of those who want the rigorous implementation of the protocol. It truly is bad for your health.

Thanks to the rigorous implementers, that is the way that they want it to be. Tragically, sadly, their pro-EU ideology is such —

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

**Mr Allister:** — that they would rather sacrifice the lives of their constituents than face the realities of the protocol.

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

**Mr Dickson:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As a person who is suffering from cancer, I take great offence at being told that my vote today may deliver death to people in Northern Ireland. I trust that the Minister of Health will explain exactly what the situation is with life-saving cancer drugs in Northern Ireland. He has a duty and an obligation to explain that and to say that —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order.

**Mr Dickson:** — Mr Allister is completely and utterly wrong in his statements in the House.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order. The Member is well aware that that is not a point of order, but his point is on the record.

I call the Minister of Health, Robin Swann, to respond to the debate.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to respond to the motion and to Members' remarks.

I reassure Members that I and my Department are committed to maintaining the supply of medicines and medical devices in order to meet the needs of people in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, I am committed to ensuring that Northern Ireland citizens continue to have the same access to new medicines and innovative treatments as citizens in the rest of the United Kingdom. As a constituent part of the United Kingdom, we should expect no less.

The Assembly can be satisfied that, as Minister of Health, I am prioritising those issues. Undoubtedly, however, where this issue is concerned, under the flawed protocol, there are challenges. Members should be aware that the Northern Ireland protocol has major implications for the regulation and supply of medicines and medical devices. Under the Northern Ireland protocol, Northern Ireland is obliged to continue to follow EU laws and regulatory processes for medicines and medical devices, but Great Britain is not. Consequently, whereas Great Britain is now subject solely to the regulatory authority of the UK medicines regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), Northern Ireland must follow the European Medicines Agency's (EMA) centralised procedure for medicines authorisation. If there are any differences in medicine licensing decisions or timelines between the two regulators, that creates a risk of divergence between Great Britain and Northern Ireland that must be managed.

We have seen an example of that in recent days with the change to the medicines licence for Tagrisso, which is a lung cancer drug.

**Mr Gildernew:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Swann:** Yes.

**Mr Gildernew:** Will the Minister also accept that any divergence between the European Union and here must also be managed?

**Mr Swann:** I said that differences between the two regulators creates a risk of divergence, so it covers both — North/South and east-west. I do not want to politicise the drug supply.

I want to talk about the example that has been used here today. Tagrisso was already licensed by the MHRA and the EMA under the Northern Ireland protocol, and Northern Ireland follows the conditions of the EMA licence. When a change of licence held by MHRA was approved under Project Orbis, it applied only to Great Britain, leaving Northern Ireland subject to an EMA update, which has not yet happened. However, in order to avoid a delay for Northern Ireland patients, the MHRA, the Department of Health and Social Care in Westminster and my Department worked together with the drug company in order to enable Tagrisso to be available in Northern Ireland

for patient use in line with the rest of the United Kingdom while allowing it to be used outside its licence. While the EMA authorisation is being finalised, Tagrisso will be available under compassionate use and judged on a case-by-case basis.

**Mr Allister:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. It is to be used on a compassionate basis as a one-off. The principle is that, once we come to next January, we will be tied in irreversibly to the EMA and its approvals, and the approvals of the UK regulatory body will cease to control us. Is that not correct?

**Mr Swann:** Tagrisso has proven to be an example of the complex issues that we currently face and the additional steps and procedures that now need to be managed when there are differences between the decisions of the MHRA and the EMA on medicine authorisation.

On supply, Members will be aware that we currently benefit from a grace period to allow the pharmaceutical industry more time to adapt its systems to comply with the new requirements under the protocol that will come into effect after 31 December 2021. The new requirements will mean that medicines moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland will be subject to additional batch testing and verification. In addition, all medicines in Northern Ireland will have to have packaging that complies with the EU falsified medicines directive.

I advise the Assembly that the grace period has been successful in mitigating potential risks to Northern Ireland medical supplies. At this time, the Department is, fortunately, not aware of significant risks to patient care because of an actual or proposed diminution in the quality of medicinal products or devices placed on the Northern Ireland market. Certainly, there has been a range of issues involving delays to deliveries of medicines and medical devices as suppliers adapt to new import arrangements. However, the majority of those relate to trader readiness and have been satisfactorily resolved at this stage. My officials continue to offer support and interventions when needed to ensure supplies for patients.

I note Members' concerns about the Northern Ireland protocol, and I agree that the challenges for the pharmaceutical industry and my Department must be addressed and worked through. The Assembly will agree that it is important that those challenges are properly defined. At this time, the true extent of how the protocol will impose barriers to trade is still to be seen, but it should be the policy of all in the House to avoid any barriers.

Since the start of the year, trade has, thankfully, been maintained, and the pharmaceutical industry has adapted to the additional regulatory and import checks required by the protocol when moving goods from GB to Northern Ireland. There is no evidence yet to suggest that patients in Northern Ireland are unable to access medicines that they need or, indeed, any issues with the safety and efficacy of the medicines that are available. However, when the grace period ends, all suppliers will have to comply fully with the requirements of the Northern Ireland protocol, and my Department is aware that companies are planning for potential major changes to their supply arrangements from January 2022. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster asked for an extension of that grace period, but the EU has yet to agree to that. Members should note that pharmaceutical companies are subject to an obligation to

ensure continuous supplies of medicinal products so that the needs of patients in Northern Ireland are met.

**Mr O'Toole:** I appreciate the Minister's giving way. I agree with him that we need to focus on ensuring that we have a solution to issues with medicines moving from GB to NI. Will he note that Almac, which is one of the biggest pharmaceutical and life sciences companies in Northern Ireland, has a section on its website called:

*"The Almac Advantage: unique, unfettered and flexible access to the UK, Europe and beyond"*

and that this enormous employer and pharmaceutical leader in Northern Ireland believes that it is an advantage for it to have access to both British and EU single markets under the protocol?

**Mr Swann:** I note what the Member says, and I note that the motion states:

*"if established, these arrangements would add cost for businesses and public services, restrict supply and jeopardise patient care across Northern Ireland"*.

That is acknowledged in the motion that we are debating today.

A number of issues were raised. We are aware that price increases are a potential risk, and, if issues emerge, we have systems in place to deal with them.

So far, there is no evidence to suggest an increase in the price of medicines, but that does not mean that that could not change.

The grace period for medicines is a short-term mitigation that has benefited the medicinal supply chain in Northern Ireland. However, to reduce the potential for risks manifesting themselves at the end of the grace period, I assure the Assembly that a number of other mitigations are ongoing.

First, medicines are the subject of ongoing discussions between the UK Government and the EU Commission to reach a negotiated position on implementation of the protocol. Secondly, my Department is working with the DHSC in London at official and ministerial level through direct and regular engagement between the Minister of State for Health and me. The underpinning principles of this work are to ensure that the clinical needs of patients in Northern Ireland are met and that equity of access to medical products is maintained across the United Kingdom. The DHSC has committed to communicating to industry specifically on supplying to Northern Ireland. My officials have requested further clarification from the DHSC regarding the time frame for that guidance.

Thirdly, the DHSC is involved in formal discussions with industry about its plans for the end of the grace period, and my Department also maintains close contact with stakeholders in industry, and officials have frequent meetings with individual companies. In addition to that, officials engage with wider stakeholder groups in the health and social care sector in Northern Ireland, with community pharmacy and with groups representing patients across a range of interests and medical conditions.

I note that the motion:

*"calls on the Minister of Health to work with his Executive colleagues"*.

I assure Members that, throughout this process, I have spoken with the Executive and provided my colleagues with a comprehensive briefing setting out my up-to-date assessment of the situation. I will, of course, continue to do so. My officials also continue to liaise with officials from the Executive Office on related matters.

I conclude by saying that the actions taken by the pharmaceutical industry and the interventions, when needed, by my officials have ensured that there has been no significant reduction in the quality or quantity of medicines and medical devices on the market in Northern Ireland. They have risen to that challenge, and the Assembly will no doubt join me in acknowledging their hard work to date and in thanking them. My Department will continue that work in the coming months to ensure that future access to medicinal products and medical devices is maintained for the citizens of Northern Ireland. My Department has the support of the Department of Health and Social Care in Westminster and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. I believe that I have clearly demonstrated that all the issues are being given serious attention by my Department and that intensive work is ongoing. I thank Members of the Health Committee for their acknowledgement of the work of the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer, Cathy Harrison, and her team in their dedication to the task.

Neither my Department nor I have created or sought this situation, and we cannot fix it by ourselves. The EU and the UK Government have central roles in finding the way forward. I have sympathy with the concerns expressed by Members.

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Swann:** Yes.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the Minister for his last few words, when he said that he cannot fix this issue on his own and that it lies between the UK Government and the EU to resolve these matters. I value the intervention of the Department of Health and the Minister on these matters, but the words that the Minister used today are important in acknowledging that we need to work on solutions and that those solutions are achievable between the UK Government and the EU.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I hope that, by demonstrating our interactions with the DHSC and the MHRA and the work by the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer and her team, he will see that we are working on the issue on a case-by-case basis. Many of the theoretical and policy problems that are presented to us need a case-by-case answer. At the end of this, it will be a political solution and agreement. No matter how much policy that departmental officials, the EU or Westminster come up with, the answer will be political.

**Mr Allister:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he confirm that all the regulations and directives listed in the protocol that touch on medicinal issues, which include veterinary medicines and medical implements, are beyond the amendment or input of this House and that all legislation touching on those matters as they affect Northern Ireland is now incapable of being made anywhere in the United Kingdom?

**5.00 pm**

**Mr Swann:** The scope of the decisions on this is outwith the competence of the House and my Department. We have a major responsibility to provide input and advice when the Department of Health and Social Care asks for it. We are getting great support from DHSC and the MHRA in recognition of the challenges that are now faced to the supply of medicines and medical devices to Northern Ireland. My deepest regret is that, as Minister of Health in Northern Ireland, I do not have a seat at that table. That is where we could truly identify all the issues that we know of and all the knock-on implications that any change will have. I would value that dedicated and detailed input.

As I was saying, I have sympathy with the concerns expressed by all Members, because this situation is very far from ideal. New layers of complexity and bureaucracy are being created. I appeal to Members to choose their words carefully, however. There are uncertainties and challenges, but every effort is being made by my Department to ensure that the needs of all our patients and people in Northern Ireland are met.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call Pam Cameron to wind on the motion.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank all the Members for their contributions, including the Minister of Health for his response. Without a doubt, this threat to Northern Ireland's medicine supply is an issue that should be debated openly and honestly. I welcome the opportunity that we have had to discuss it.

I am sure that every one of us, when we talk to constituents, says that one of our highest priorities, if not the highest, is health. Our health service is the jewel in the crown of our Union. We all value that free-at-the-point-of-need service: in the past 12 months, more than ever before. It should always be a priority, because our health service keeps us well and saves lives.

Key to the success of our health service is access to medicines and medical devices. In the United Kingdom, we benefit greatly from the very latest treatments and cutting-edge technology, all administered by our amazing front-line healthcare workers. Approximately 98% of medicines and medical products used in Northern Ireland are imported either from or via Great Britain. It is a life-saving supply chain, yet, because of the protocol, that free flow of medicines and medical devices is now under severe threat. Medicines moving from GB into Northern Ireland will be handled as though they are goods entering the EU from a third country. That means that medicines moving into Northern Ireland from GB will be subject to additional batch testing and qualified-person certification.

On 1 January next year, when the grace period ends, all medicines used in Northern Ireland will have to comply with the EU medicines directive. That affects the packaging of the medicines, but the same —.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Cameron:** I will not, thank you.

That affects the packaging of the medicines, but the same requirements will not apply to products marketed in GB. The fact that the EU calls it a "grace period" is in itself an insult.

Medicines in Northern Ireland must comply with the European licence and with requirements set out by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), whilst those in Great Britain do not.

GB manufacturers that place medical devices on the Northern Ireland market must now appoint an EU- or Northern Ireland-based authorised representative. I have spoken with many suppliers in recent weeks, and they testify to intolerable levels of paperwork and bureaucracy, including issues with couriers and a substantial increase in the cost of doing business with long-standing clients in Northern Ireland. Non-UK manufacturers are now required to appoint a UK-responsible person or a Northern Ireland —.

**Mr O'Toole:** I appreciate the Member's giving way. I do not dispute that there are issues that we need to address constructively. The Member mentioned the increase in paperwork. Does she accept that, for anyone importing goods into GB from Europe, that enormous European market from which a huge number of medicines are imported into the UK, is also facing a huge increase in paperwork, because that, unfortunately, is what Brexit is?

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the Member for his intervention.

Non-UK manufacturers are now required to appoint a UK responsible person or a Northern Ireland-authorised person, who, along with Northern Ireland manufacturers, must register devices with the MHRA before they are placed on the Northern Ireland market. Furthermore, medicines on clinical trial will follow EU regulations in NI but not in GB. With the times that we are in and us having benefited so greatly from the UK vaccination programme, it is significant that Northern Ireland will follow EU regulations on vaccines and Great Britain will not. While Members from some parties want us to follow the European vaccine programme, I think that, once again, we are better with the Union of the United Kingdom and not with the European Union.

The British Generic Manufacturers Association has made it clear that the intolerable and unsustainable position that has been foisted on us at the behest of the EU will prevent identical products from being supplied to GB and NI. It will mean that businesses will have to duplicate resources and supply lines

**A Member:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Cameron:** I will not. Thanks.

Firms may need to build extra warehousing and hire more staff to ensure that medicines comply with both EU and UK regulations, which simply is not viable in the longer term. Given the small margins, that will not be sustainable, and some GB manufacturers report that up to 90% of medicines could be at risk of being withdrawn.

Sadly, the consequences of what the EU is demanding are likely to impact specialist illnesses particularly hard, given that smaller quantities are needed and the cost of creating an NI-only pool of products would be prohibitive. It would also disrupt direct patient supply, especially for nutritional products, such as gluten-free food, infant formula and some personal home-care products. That is in addition to the threat to the supply and the choices available to local health and social care services. Access to clinical trials and accessing new developments in the

production of medicines, including vaccine supplies, would be threatened and, at the very least, slowed down.

Who among us feels that that is the best deal and the best for the health and well-being of those whom we represent? The rigorous implementation of the protocol, shamefully demanded by some local parties and the Irish Government, is damaging to the public health of everyone in Northern Ireland. It is not an orange or green or a Leave or Remain issue. It affects everyone. Whilst some Members opposite will no doubt seek to dismiss those issues, their cherished protocol is depriving lung cancer patients here of the same chance of recovery as those in GB. That is absolutely scandalous.

**Mr Gildernew:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Cameron:** I will not.

**Mr Gildernew:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Cameron:** No, thank you.

This is a stark example of how the EU, the Irish Government and others, even in this place, will stop at nothing to penalise the people of Northern Ireland.

The invoking of article 16 of the protocol in January ended the facade that Northern Ireland would be treated as a full and equal member of the EU single market. As Brussels considers new export controls on COVID-19 vaccines, there is no guarantee that our Province will escape the fallout. The residual threat to the domestic supply of medicines is one of the most telling examples of why the notion of the best of both worlds is a dangerous myth.

Given that there is already very little direct North/South trade in medicines because of different licensing regimes, there is minimal threat to the EU market or consumers. While the protocol was championed under false pretences, the reality is that medicines and medical devices should never have been in the conversation in the first place. A permanent decoupling of public health from the protocol by the EU and the UK is long overdue. They should pursue a comprehensive mutual recognition agreement on medicines that takes the politics out of it and ensures the free flow of goods across our United Kingdom.

The bottom line and minimum requirement are that medicines that are produced in Great Britain should be able to be legally used in Northern Ireland without additional barriers or hurdles. Quick fixes and tinkering at the edges of the problems will not cut the mustard. There needs to be a meaningful and sustainable replacement of the protocol. It is time that we all recognise the perilous implications for patients, pharmacies and local health services. I ask all those who will go to the doors of constituents over the next 12 months to back up their claims, to make health a priority and to support the motion.

*Question put.*

**Some Members:** Aye.

**Some Members:** No.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members that they should continue to uphold social distancing and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come to the Chamber.

Also, it would be preferable to avoid a Division and the use of the Lobbies.

*Question put a second time.*

**Some Members:** Aye.

**Some Members:** No.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Before the Assembly divides, I remind the House 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. Please ensure that you maintain gaps of at least 2 metres between yourselves and others when moving around in the Chamber or the Rotunda and especially in the Lobbies. Please be patient at all times, observe the signage and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks.

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 38; Noes 46.*

## AYES

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Buckley and Mr Middleton.*

## NOES

*Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, 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, 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 Noes: Mr Gildernew and Mr Sheehan.*

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

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

*Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton [Teller, Noes], Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.*

*Mr Butler voted for Mr 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, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew [Teller, Noes], 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'Neil,  
Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan [Teller, Noes] and Ms Sheerin.*

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

*Question accordingly negatived.*

**5.30 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before we move on to the next item of business.

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

## Assembly Business

### **Standing Order 10(3A): Extension of Sitting**

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

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 17 May 2021 be extended to no later than 7.30pm. — [Mr Butler.]*

## Private Members' Business

### Ending Religious Discrimination in Teaching Appointments

**Mr Butler:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the exemption in fair employment law allowing discrimination on the grounds of religious belief when appointing teachers; acknowledges that it is unacceptable that teachers should be excluded from protection from discrimination in employment on the grounds of religious belief; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to repeal urgently this exemption to ensure equal opportunities in employment are afforded to all without exception.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to an 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.

**Mr Butler:** I put on record my thanks to all our teachers across Northern Ireland for their service. I thank them not only for their service throughout the pandemic but for what they do day and daily for our young people. While their role and challenge is predominantly to engage in and promote our children's academic attainment and growth, teachers are increasingly being tasked with increasingly diverse responsibilities. I and everybody else in the House have full admiration for the job that they do. Through the motion, we seek to recognise an archaic and unfair barrier to fair employment for teachers across our diverse community.

No one who reads the research information in the debate pack can ignore how important an issue this inequality has been for the Ulster Unionist Party for many years. In 2013, a petition of concern was used to block an attempt by my UUP colleagues, former MLAs, to change the legislation. Multiple private Members' motions, which were tabled by former MLA colleagues such as Danny Kinahan and Sandra Overend, were debated in the Chamber. Sadly, in 2015, much like today, no Executive Minister was present to respond to the motion. That is disappointing. I recognise that the issue is as important for other Members, certainly for those on the Education Committee. Many Members have verbally committed to the change, none more so than Chris Lyttle, who is consulting on a private Member's Bill on the same topic.

We need to be clear about exactly what we will talk about today. The debate should not be broadened beyond the out-of-date, out-of-place and out-of-order circumstance that employment discrimination has a home in Northern Ireland because of the teachers' exemption rule. Ulster University's 'Transforming Education: Employment Mobility of Teachers and the FETO Exception' briefing paper makes the startling statement:

*"The separation of teachers is maintained through three areas of policy:*

*1. Teacher Education*

*2. Religious Education in Schools*

*3. The teacher exception from FETO 1998."*

If we are truly sincere about a shared future in Northern Ireland, legislation that legitimises discrimination cannot be OK. Another telling excerpt from the briefing paper reads:

*"No other profession has the same potential for daily engagement with young minds — but no other profession separates its exponents so rigorously and effectively along community/religious/ethnic lines. It is unlikely that any other profession will have as many exponents with as limited exposure to 'the other side'."*

There is a caveat to the use of "the other side": it is in the document, but the authors add a caveat and explain what it actually means. It continues:

*"Yet no other profession carries the same burden of expectation around the building of the community bridges necessary to ensure a shared, peaceful future."*

I know that, across the Chamber, that is exactly what we want to see, even if we travel in different vehicles sometimes.

We place massive burdens and expectations on our teachers, especially the burden of building a vision for inclusivity and a better, shared future than we had to tolerate as young people. Our children's futures are entrusted to them. We must ask ourselves this: "Are we making this task an impossible dream by corraling our teachers, whether deliberately or by political inaction?". It is hard — in fact, it is nigh on impossible — to imagine where such an exemption would be permissible or acceptable. The impacts of that draconian measure extend beyond employment opportunities for teachers, however.

It has been pointed out in reports that the reality for many teachers in Northern Ireland, and what is being achieved by the status quo, is a chill factor, when teachers look for employment and, through no fault of their own, select and make application predominantly to schools that reflect their own community identity. It can extend to a cycle in which a person learns in a community-concentrated school, achieves teacher qualifications in a community-centred college, and then goes on to teach in a community-concentrated school.

The assumption was borne out in 2018, when over 1,000 teachers completed an online survey conducted through the UNESCO Centre at Ulster University. It showed that 2% of teachers who work in Catholic maintained sector primaries attended a controlled primary school in Northern Ireland and that 7% of teachers who are employed in controlled primary schools were educated in a Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) primary. Given that the vast majority of our nursery and primary-school teachers are women, this is clearly indirect discrimination against women in particular. Similarly, 8% of those teaching in CCMS post-primaries and 17% of teachers in Catholic voluntary grammar schools attended non-Catholic primaries in Northern Ireland, while 17% of those employed in controlled post-primary schools and 23% of teachers in non-Catholic grammar schools attended CCMS primaries.

Whilst some may point to the obvious disparity between the measurable ability of the controlled sector to attract teachers from a more diverse community background than

the Catholic maintained sector, we must insist that more can be done, that more must be done, and that none of the figures reported can be called a success or celebrated. It must be reinforced that I have no concern as to the level or quality of teaching that our teachers give in every sector or their ability to provide a first-class educational return. Rather, I am concerned about the missed opportunities that a more community-balanced and reflective slate of teachers could bring to all our schools. That would contribute to a deliberate and meaningful move towards the shared society that we all desire.

It was welcome to hear, today, the continuing commitment of Geraldine McGahey, chief commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, who welcomed the motion. The Equality Commission has long recommended the removal of teachers' exemption from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998. Its view is that:

*"all teachers should be able to enjoy the same legislative protections as other workers"*

and that:

*"it is no longer acceptable to exclude the entire teaching workforce from the fair employment legislative provisions".*

There is a complete hypocrisy at play if we claim that we are truly in pursuit of a shared future. Without change, the vision of shared education will not succeed. Unless schools have interchangeable staff, whether that be at recruitment or upon promotion, and unless teachers can and do apply across the schools estate and are then selected based 100% on their holistic ability and fit to that school, perhaps we are doomed to fail. I commend the motion.

**Mr Clarke:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. You caught me on the hop there. I thought that it would have been the other side first.

I commend the proposer of the motion. Given that he has gone through so many of the statistics, it is hard to follow him other than to lay out our support for the motion. I would like to echo his comments about the teaching staff, regardless of what background they come from. Teaching is a vocation that these people go into. I am sure that, when they chose it as a vocation, they did not see the discriminatory part that we want to debate. I am sure that that was always far from their minds.

When I thought about this debate, I thought about a young teacher who is setting out. People shape the idea of their career at a young age. We hear about the oversupply of teachers. However, when we look at how this plays out, we see that there is positive discrimination, particularly against people who come from a Protestant faith background. That should not be the case. Everyone should be treated equally. Education should be equal, and some of the religious aspects should be taught in churches as opposed to schools. As the proposer of the motion laid out, this has been well and often debated, going back as far as 2013. It is disappointing that we are still having the conversation today. I look forward to hearing others' comments to see if we can right what has been a wrong for so long.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Member for giving way. Northern Ireland has an education system with an extremely

good record on schools' ability to present pupils with opportunities that lead on to qualifications and university. Can the Member think of any reason why a member of one faith should not teach in a school that is predominantly another faith? Why should an applicant be refused that opportunity, if he is a well-qualified teacher of history, geography, mathematics or whatever, just because of his or her religion?

5.45 pm

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

**Mr Clarke:** I do not think that I will need it. The Member who intervened made the point, which I had written down, much better than I could have. He makes a very interesting point. You could expand on that. In the RalSe pack, there is reference to the need for the certificate and what purpose that has been designed for in relation to the ethos of the Catholic Church in particular. That could equally be said of the Protestant faith. For people who practise that faith, there are particular things, but there is nothing to impede anyone else from teaching in that sector. It is as if the exemption has been created as an article of positive discrimination. Rather than rehearse everything that has been said, I welcome the motion, and we on these Benches will support it.

**Mr Sheehan:** I speak in support of the motion. Before I move on to the main part of my contribution, I note that, a couple of times today, I have heard about the great education system that we have here. I heard it earlier during the statement that was given by the Education Minister. In fact, we have the longest tail of underachievement in Europe. Yes, we compare well with our peers across the water on A level and GCSE results, but, while we have that, nobody can stand here and boast about a great education system.

The motion relates to the exemption under the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998 (FETO), which:

*"allows schools to lawfully discriminate on grounds of religious belief, in the appointment of teachers in schools."*

A consequence of that exemption is:

*"schools are not required to monitor the community background of their teaching staff. In addition, they are not required to carry out reviews of their teaching workforces, or of the employment policies and practices affecting teaching staff, or consider whether they are providing fair participation to members of the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities, in relation to the employment of teachers."*

The Equality Commission has, as Robbie Butler mentioned, recommended the removal of that exemption from FETO, and Sinn Féin shares its assessment, which is:

*"all teachers should be able to enjoy the same legislative protection as other workers".*

During the Equality Commission's investigation of the issue, concerns were raised by Catholic schools that the FETO exemption was a necessary tool to protect the ethos of their schools. Catholic schools help many young people to reach and achieve their academic potential.



That is due in part, no doubt, to the excellent teaching standards of those schools, but the sector also argues that its strong emphasis on a particular ethos in those schools contributes to the positive outcomes in Catholic schools. It is well documented that the vast majority of highest-achieving schools are in the Catholic sector. Be that as it may, but I would argue that exemption —.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Member for giving way. The Member is right: the Catholic education system is performing extremely well in Northern Ireland. We should all be glad about that, but this issue is not particular to the Northern Ireland education system. This is an issue that operates in various parts of the world.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Beidh bomaite breise agat, a Phádraig. You have an extra minute added to your time.

**Mr Sheehan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I argue that an exemption from fair employment legislation is not the platform that should be used for nurturing any ethos in any school.

Members will be aware that Ulster University's Transforming Education programme has produced a series of papers on a range of issues. The Assembly recently debated its paper on academic selection, and the Transforming Education team also published a paper, which I think Robbie also referred to, about teacher mobility across different school sectors and the impact of the FETO exemption on that. While there was evidence of a considerable number of Catholic teachers moving into the controlled sector, traffic in the opposite direction was much lower. Our education system only stands to benefit from greater levels of professional mobility across sectors. I want to take this opportunity to commend the work of the Transforming Education team in Ulster University for its positive, evidence-based contributions to education policy in the North.

Sinn Féin is on the side of workers on this issue. We cannot continue to have a situation where our teachers do not have access to the same level of equality and discrimination protections as other workers. The main teaching unions are in favour of removing the exemption, and all parties now seem to be on the same page on the issue.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for giving way. He made the point that he always speaks up for workers. Given, then, the point that I made, which was that nursery-school and primary-school teachers are predominantly women, does he agree that this legislative provision can be likened to an indirectly discriminatory measure against women by preventing them from gaining employment?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Member has very little time.

**Mr Sheehan:** I do not disagree with the Member, but I would have to see some evidence.

In conclusion, I am aware that some consideration is being given to the issue in TEO, and I hope that some progress can be made before the end of the mandate.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I call Daniel McCrossan.

**Mr McCrossan:** Thank you, Mr Principal — sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. I gave you an elevation there.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion, but I must state from the outset that I am disappointed that no Minister has turned up for this all-important debate; maybe they are stuck in a lift somewhere. This is an issue that has been lingering on for years, and it does need to be dealt with. I welcome the opportunity to debate it today. The SDLP has considered the issue in great detail over many years on the occasions that it has come up, and today we will vote in support of the motion.

It is very clear that FETO, the Fair Employment and Treatment Order, has been very contentious in the Chamber. There have been differences of opinion, but it is interesting that, from gauging the Chamber today, opinions have shifted. Things have changed on what was once a very contentious issue of considerable debate in the House.

It is equally important that, in the context of this debate, we recognise that the issues that we are discussing impact most on our valued, dedicated and hard-working teachers across Northern Ireland. It is important that today's debate reflects not only the views of the parties across Chamber but the views of our teachers, especially our young teachers who are entering the education workforce for the very first time.

The SDLP supports the motion as we believe that the legislative measure currently in place has long outlasted its necessity. The Fair Employment and Treatment Order was brought into being in 1998. It includes an exemption under article 71, which is based on 1976 legislation to address the imbalance in employment opportunities for teachers. However, since 1976, the social, political, cultural and religious landscape across the North has changed substantially.

An exemption that affords a legal right to discriminate against a teacher is not something that we can support in 2021. Indeed, it is absolutely abhorrent that any teacher could be selected for a job based simply on their religion rather than because they are the best candidate for the job. That exemption needs to be stripped out of legislation, which would bring our laws up to date and provide blanket protection for teachers against religious discrimination.

Over the past number of years, we have seen in these institutions Ministers and Departments passing the buck rather than grasping and dealing with the issue. We have seen the Education Minister and consecutive Ministers attempt to wash their hands of the issue, while the Executive Office sits on its hands and fails to act. That inaction, despite majority consensus on the way forward, is unacceptable and raises significant questions about who or what is actually holding us back from moving on the issue.

It is important to refer to the CCMS position on the teacher exemption. Previously, it stated categorically that it was happy to see the exemption removed, and, as far back as 2013, it wrote to the Executive Office in order to express its support for that. That was welcomed eight years ago, yet we are still waiting for a review into abolishing the measure. Again, I ask this: what has taken it so long?

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for giving way. He has, obviously, read the pack in detail. It is good to note that. As regards the discussion around 2013 to 2015, the same question was raised and the perceived logjam could not

be identified. The non-appearance of Executive Office Ministers or the Minister of Education — we were looking for Executive Office Ministers today — perhaps points to something. Does the Member share my concern that, although this could be a good debate and we could get unanimity in it, perhaps the logjam is higher up the chain than we once thought?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

**Mr McCrossan:** I welcome the Member's intervention. I absolutely agree that questions need to be asked about the root cause of the situation. A few weeks ago in the House, the First Minister said in response to a question from my constituency colleague Nicola Brogan that she supports getting rid of the exemption. Sinn Féin supports getting rid of it. So, I do not quite understand where the logjam is.

It is important to refer to the Certificate in Religious Education (CRE), which has spawned a number of debates over the years. The SDLP has welcomed the collaboration between St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College that has been ongoing since 2019 to ensure that student teachers have access to the CRE as part of the bachelor's degree. That is an example of St Mary's commitment to shared education and equality. It has been a massive step forward and fully complements the great work that St Mary's and Peter Finn, in particular, have been doing for many years, yet, not too long ago, there were financial threats emanating from the Executive in this very institution that called into question St Mary's very existence. The SDLP remained four-square in support of St Mary's, which has been and remains a centre of teaching excellence in west Belfast, catering for teaching students from across the North and beyond.

The SDLP is happy to support the motion in the context that the entire landscape has changed since the introduction of the teaching exemption to equality legislation. I welcome the debate. It is a sign that things have changed. I welcome the motion, and I thank the Ulster Unionists and my Committee colleague Robbie Butler for bringing it to the House.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

**Mr McCrossan:** It is a sign that things have changed. I welcome and commend the motion.

**Mr Lyttle:** I, too, am genuinely shocked that not one of the four Executive Office Ministers has attended the debate. I am genuinely eager to hear whether there is an explanation for that non-attendance, because, in the absence of any explanation, it is difficult not to conclude that the failure of any of the four Executive Office Ministers to attend is consistent with the failure to respond to this equality issue in over a decade of having responsibility for it.

The Alliance Party and, it seems, most political parties in the Assembly are clear that teachers should be included in the Fair Employment and Treatment Order. I will, therefore, speak in support of the motion. I acknowledge that those who tabled the motion brought the matter to the Assembly on a number of previous occasions. The Assembly should, however, debate legislation on the matter, not motions. That is why I will propose a private Member's Bill to repeal the exemption of teachers from the Fair Employment

and Treatment Order. I hope that I will have the support of all parties in the Assembly in the consideration of that legislation.

The consultation on the proposed private Member's Bill is open for public response, and a link is available on the Assembly website. It will close on 10 June, in time for the submission of a final proposal to the Speaker, which will, I hope, meet with approval for drafting into a Bill that will be presented in time for consideration before the end of this mandate.

## 6.00 pm

We cannot allow another mandate to pass without considering legislation to repeal the anachronistic exclusion of teachers from fair employment protection. The Fair Employment Act outlawed employment discrimination on the grounds of religious belief in Northern Ireland in 1976, yet the Fair Employment and Treatment Order continues to permit discrimination on the grounds of religious belief in the recruitment of teachers to this day.

Almost all workers in Northern Ireland can rely on legislation to protect them from discrimination on grounds of their faith, but that protection is denied to teachers. Employers in Northern Ireland with 11 or more employees must register with the Equality Commission and monitor the composition of their workforce, but that does not apply to the teaching workforce.

What is the consequence of this legal discrimination? Recent research carried out by the UNESCO education centre at Ulster University suggests that only 2% of teachers in Catholic primary schools are from a Protestant background, and, in primary schools with mainly Protestant pupils, only 7% of teachers are from a Catholic background. That cannot be an acceptable status quo.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland recommended the removal of the exception at secondary level in 2004 and that early consideration be given to removing it at primary level, as it is considered no longer acceptable to exclude the entire teaching workforce from fair employment legislation that covers all other occupations. It has also recommended that teachers be included in monitoring and review requirements. Alliance supports that recommendation. We support the motion and will seek the support of all parties in the Assembly for a Bill to include teachers in fair employment legislation.

**Ms Brogan:** I support the motion and thank my Committee colleague Robbie Butler for bringing it to the Floor. Those in the education sector who, at some point, supported the exception, argued that it was necessary in preserving a specific ethos in some schools. I have no doubt that a strong ethos is the foundation on which a lot of the academic success that many of our young people enjoy is built, but fair employment legislation is not the place for dealing with issues of ethos.

In recent times, teacher representatives quite rightly viewed the exception as discriminatory and called for its removal. I am sure that our faith-based schools are sufficiently confident and resilient to welcome teachers from all backgrounds and of different faiths.

The changes do not remove the right of schools to exercise exception where the nature of the task is directly related to a particular religious belief. Our schools already

work together to promote understanding and tolerance across different faiths. It is simply an extension of the good work that our schools are undertaking. They do not need me to tell them that diversity is to be cherished and even celebrated.

As Mr Butler said, and Mr Lyttle had the same statistics, recent research has shown that only 2% of teachers in Catholic primary schools were from Protestant backgrounds, and, in primary schools with mainly Protestant pupils, only 7% of teachers were from a Catholic background.

It has also been mentioned today that the Equality Commission has recommended the removal of the exception from secondary schools and early consideration of its removal from primary schools. It also recommended that teachers be included in the monitoring and review obligations attached to fair employment legislation.

It is clear that what was once seen as a pragmatic compromise is now viewed as a barrier to equality. All workers should be afforded protections under fair employment rights. I do not think that anyone would disagree with that. I support the motion and urge other Members to do the same.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I, too, support the motion and wonder why it has taken this length of time to bring forward legislation to bring this matter to a conclusion. During my time as Minister, I stated publicly that I supported the removal of the clause from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order. At that time, I also corresponded with the Executive Office on bringing forward legislation to remove it because it was no longer necessary, if it ever was necessary, in our education system.

It is about protecting the rights of workers. Those who work in our schools should be under the same legislation as those in every other workplace.

It is worth noting that, in terms of the percentages of one denomination or another working in schools, the controlled sector is very varied. It would be a mistake to refer to it simply as the "Protestant sector". A variety of schools are encapsulated in it. You need to drill down deeper to see where people are working in a different background from the schools in which they were taught, but the figures are very poor. That needs to be examined further. The ending of the exemption will bring opportunities across our society for people to work in schools from different backgrounds than those from which they originally came.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Member for giving way. What does he, as a former Education Minister, believe to be the reason for the delay? This has been going on for so many years. Is it something in the Department?

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** It is not within the gift of the Department of Education to bring it forward. Legislation relating to it belongs to the Executive Office, which is responsible for equality legislation. The simple answer is that I do not know. It may be because of other legislative pressures at various times in the different Executives.

I am not suggesting that anybody has hinted at this today, but nobody should believe that Members and parties calling for the removal of the exemption in FETO is an

indication that they are in favour of an education system that does not recognise the ethos of the Catholic sector. I am not talking about the religious ethos. It is not my job to defend any Church, but you have to look at the history of this state to understand the Catholic sector. If it had not been for the Catholic sector, Irish culture and identity in this part of the island would have been educated away. In fairness to those who embedded the Catholic education system in our society, they defended the Irish culture and language and allowed young people to be Irish in their own land. That ethos has to continue.

**Mr Newton:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Give me one second, and I will.

That ethos has to continue as our education system evolves over time.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he recognise that, as I said to Mr Sheehan, this is not an issue that is particular to Northern Ireland? It is an issue in other parts of the world, including some of the most liberal societies.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The point that I am trying to make is not necessarily about educational attainment, which is higher in certain Catholic schools. It also has to be said that there are high levels of educational underattainment in the Catholic sector. More Catholic boys than Protestant boys leave school without proper qualifications. The figures for Protestant young people is higher percentage-wise, but it is higher for Catholic young people numbers-wise. I am talking about identity. The Catholic sector allowed the identity of Irishness to exist. As we move forward and our education system and our society evolve, that has to continue. That has to be an important part of any future education system.

On the stand-alone issue of the exemption, I support its removal. I do not know why it has taken so long for it to come about. Mr Lyttle's private Member's Bill may well be the solution to that, although I never judge any legislation until I have read it clause by clause. I await his legislation. That may be the answer to the equation before us, but I fully support the principle of removing the exemption.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Member for Lagan Valley for tabling today's motion. I am happy to support it. I attended a Catholic primary school and a Catholic secondary school. My Catholic education helped to shape the person I am today. It helped to hone my values, beliefs, identity and sense of humanity. My Catholic education taught me that we all belong to one human family.

It taught me to be a global, outward-looking citizen and to play my part in making this world a better place. To me, the ethos of Catholic education is about the whole-school and whole-world experience. As Pope Francis put it, Catholic education:

*"recognizes that humankind's moral responsibility today does not just extend through space, but also through time, and that present choices have repercussions for future generations."*

I believe that there is now, and always will be, a place for faith in our education system, but I also believe that to discriminate against or prevent someone from getting a job in a school, or, indeed, in any place of work, based on that person's religious belief is wrong. As I said at the

Education Committee recently, I cannot believe that such legislation is still on our statute books. It is outdated and should be removed. I want to take Pope Francis at his word that:

*“present choices have repercussions for future generations.”*

I want to build a fairer, better and more equal society. I want to build a society that shares this place and that provides opportunity for everyone who opts to call this place home. I want to build a society that embraces those of Christian faith, other faiths and, indeed, those with no faith at all. I want to build a society with an education system that, at its core, promotes equality and nourishes ambition and opportunity. We must lead by example. The exemption of teachers and schools from the FETO legislation has passed its sell-by date. I support the motion.

**Ms Armstrong:** Like everyone else who has spoken so far, I am, of course, going to support the removal of teachers from not the “exemption” but what is called the “exception” in the Fair Employment and Treatment Order.

Why are teachers not protected? This is not just about religion or teaching religion but about protecting teachers. Across the world, Northern Ireland is picked out for having very good recruitment processes. There are protections in place for employees, and if you are not treated well, you can go to a tribunal or to court, where you can win your case and be awarded the job or get the promotion for which you were turned down. You have access to all of that, but we do not allow our teachers to do so. Those are the people who quite often look after children for more hours of the day than parents see them. I believe completely that teachers should be included in our Fair Employment and Treatment Order: of course they should.

As Mr Sheehan and others said, unions have said that it should be done away with, because, as Justin McCamphill said:

*“The exemption to the Fair Employment and Treatment Order is outdated and needs to be removed.”*

Why therefore has it not been done?

Given how many non-binding party motions that we have had in this place over the past number of weeks, I have to ask why the Executive Office has not brought this matter forward. It is not as if it is overburdened with legislation. I do not get it. I do not understand, and I would really have loved for one of them to be here today to explain to us why that cannot happen. Why does it have to take a private Member's Bill to do it? Why do we have to take up the time of Assembly staff for something that could easily be done? We all support the motion.

To be very clear, we do have the independent review of education, but that will take years and years to implement. That, if it comes forward, has the potential to make the biggest changes to our education system in Northern Ireland, but it will take a long time.

To be clear to anybody who is listening in, although I doubt that that is the case at this time of the night, this is not about bashing people of faith. This is not about Catholic-bashing. There are other areas in which Catholic ethos can be carried through. We see it already in integrated schools.

I went through Catholic education: primary school and post-primary school. I attended one of the best schools in Northern Ireland. My daughter went through integrated schools. She still got her Catholic sacraments. There was no difference.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for giving way. My learned colleague Justin from the Education Committee referred to Pope Francis. In 2018, I had the privilege of going to Dublin to meet the Pope. I went down a Christian Protestant unionist. When I came back up, I was a Christian Protestant unionist, and the Pope was still a Catholic.

Genuinely, what were they trying to do? Did people genuinely fear that teachers would be converted or that children would be converted? Does the Member agree that the exemption is just discrimination?

**6.15 pm**

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

**Ms Armstrong:** Hopefully, I will not need it, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Let us be very clear: we do not want discrimination in anybody's workplace. As I said, this is not about bashing people of faith; it is about giving teachers fair employment. When we are looking at the independent review of education, the removal of the exemption is one step further towards inclusive education. It is not about blinding out people's backgrounds and cultures. We should be developing people who respect themselves and who they are and respect others for who they are. It is time to move forward, and removing the exemption would be a good and welcome way forward. Just as we have Stranmillis University College, which offers the education certificate, there is a way to move this forward.

I understand completely the Catholic Church's concerns, especially in primary education where there is protection and where Catholic teachers can bring forward the ethos for sacraments. However, I draw people's attention to the fact that the Equality Commission has basically provided a solution. It has said that, in order to take the chill factor away from people of other backgrounds seeking employment in those schools or feeling like they cannot apply for a teaching job in a certain type of school, a discussion can happen on positive action or affirmative action, if it needs to be taken, and plans can be put in place. That is as long as people know clearly whether they can apply before they apply.

We have an Equality Commission that has been asking for a removal of the exemption. We are all asking for that, and there are solutions for people who have issues with doing so. We do not need to bland out who people are: we can celebrate diversity and inclusion. Now is the time, but I would have loved it if our Executive Office Ministers had been here, stood up and said, “Grand, no problem. We've heard you all and are going to take it forward”. There is not enough time left in the mandate for them to do that, so it will be over to Mr Lyttle. I hope that his private Member's Bill is tabled in time for it to be heard and taken forward.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** In the absence of a ministerial response, I call Mrs Rosemary Barton to give a

winding-up speech. Mrs Barton, you have up to 10 minutes to do so.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank everyone for taking part in the debate. It has really been interesting, and it is great to hear everybody speaking with such a united voice.

Mr Butler spoke first, saying that removing the inequality is something that the UUP has been working towards since 2013. Sandra Overend brought several motions on the issue to the Assembly at that time. Robbie said that he is looking towards a much better and shared future with inclusiveness and diversity in which we work together. He talked about a chill factor that is related to discrimination in the teaching profession and looked forward to that being removed.

Mr Clarke gave his support for the motion and welcomed it. He stated that everyone should be treated equally and that religion should be taught in churches and not schools.

Mr Sheehan gave his support to the motion and said that we in Northern Ireland have the longest tale of underachievement in Europe. He said that schools are not required to carry out a review of their workforce in relation to fair employment. He also talked about the excellent teaching standards in Catholic schools, which he attributed to their ethos. He also spoke about the greater levels of professional mobility across the sectors that there are now.

Mr McCrossan said that he was disappointed that no Minister had turned up to listen to the debate and that the SDLP would be supporting the motion. He said that laws against religious discrimination needed to be brought forward and said that we need to ask what is holding that up from happening in the Assembly. He said that such laws needed to be enacted as quickly as possible to get rid of that discrimination.

Mr Lyttle spoke passionately about the legislation that he hopes to bring forward. He talked about the Equality Commission and about teachers in primary and secondary schools. He said that their employment needed to be reviewed and monitored in the future when the legislation is brought in.

Ms Brogan spoke about teachers' representatives and called for the removal of this discriminatory law. She spoke about it being supported by the Equality Commission and said that all workers should have the right to fair employment protection.

Mr O'Dowd supported the removal of the FETO clause and said that it was no longer necessary. He said that the controlled sector was wide and varied, with people from different communities and backgrounds. He spoke about Catholic culture and said that it defended the Irish identity and helped it to exist.

Mr McNulty spoke about his very good Catholic education that made him the man that he now is. He believes that there is still a place for faith in education but legislation must be brought forward to ensure that there is no discrimination against teachers when they apply for positions in schools.

Ms Armstrong asked questions about the Executive Office and what the hold-up was. She also said that teachers must be afforded the right to fair employment

and that there must be developments towards an inclusive education system.

I will say a few words on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. In Northern Ireland, discrimination laws still apply. It remains perfectly legal for an employer to select between applicants for teaching posts in grant-aided schools solely on the basis of their faith or religious belief. Unlike other organisations and businesses that employ 10 or more staff, teacher employing authorities are not required by law to monitor their practices for fairness or to record the community composition of their workforce.

It is, however, clear from this afternoon's debate that a fairer way, leading to equality of opportunity for all teachers as they enter the profession and apply for their first post or as they progress up the career ladder, will have to be established. Over the past few years, approximately 40% to 50% of the jobs advertised in teaching have limited appeal to all teachers because they do not meet the eligibility criteria for teaching posts, particularly in the Catholic maintained nursery and primary schools. Those positions require the applicant to possess a recognised RE certificate, which leads to inequality when teachers apply for those posts. That mandatory certificate was a CCMS requirement, although I have learnt this afternoon that it has now dropped that requirement, which is good news.

In very recent years, particularly in the post-primary schools, there has been greater mobility among the teaching profession, with many controlled schools now employing teachers who have not been educated in the faith of the school. That has happened particularly in the controlled sector, where appointments are more subject-based. Teacher mobility between the traditional sectors is also inextricably connected with the separation of teacher education institutions and the policy concerning the place of religion in schools in Northern Ireland.

As we become an increasingly multicultural society, the Fair Employment and Treatment Order needs to be recognised in Northern Ireland's education system. Parents have a right, according to the European Convention on Human Rights, to bring up their children in the religion or belief of their choice. However, apart from independent Christian schools, all schools in Northern Ireland are fully state-funded, so should teachers not have a right to apply for all available positions within their ability without being curtailed?

In April 2019, 98% of those surveyed for a LucidTalk poll indicated that organisations that employ teachers should aim to select the best person for the job, while 82% stated that those organisations should be subject to the same equal opportunities monitoring as other employers. A total of 71% believed that the teacher exception to the Fair Employment and Treatment Order should be repealed.

It is certainly not acceptable that teachers today are subject to discrimination on religious grounds. Therefore, I ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister to remove the exemption and ensure that every teacher has equality of opportunity and is able to apply for work in any school, regardless of their faith or perceived community background. No teacher should be denied an opportunity to teach or become a principal of a school on the basis of their religious belief.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the exemption in fair employment law allowing discrimination on the grounds of religious belief when appointing teachers; acknowledges that it is unacceptable that teachers should be excluded from protection from discrimination in employment on the grounds of religious belief; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to repeal urgently this exemption to ensure equal opportunities in employment are afforded to all without exception.*

*Adjourned at 6.26 pm.*

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 18 May 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Matter of the Day

### HMICFRS Inspection of the PSNI's Handling of the Bobby Storey Funeral

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Mervyn Storey has been given leave to make a statement on the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspection of the PSNI's handling of the Bobby Storey funeral, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called to speak, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

**Mr Storey:** I welcome the opportunity to make this statement to the House on the findings of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary that were published yesterday. The scenes that were witnessed at the funeral of Bobby Storey, when thousands of people were brought on to the streets by Sinn Féin, were in breach of the spirit and the letter of the COVID regulations. Their actions cast a dark shadow over the culture of lawfulness and were an embarrassment to law and order in Northern Ireland during the pandemic. Not for the first time in the history of Sinn Féin have we seen it use the dead or the dying for its own agenda. If it was prepared to ignore the dying wishes of Bobby Sands, one of its republican icons, encouraging and organising thousands of people on to the streets of west Belfast would be seen by it as what needed to be done. No respect, no regard, no restraint. The movement was more important than any other consideration.

How different were the actions of many across Northern Ireland who had to bury their loved one alone, isolated and within the law. It all stands in stark contrast to the way in which our gracious Majesty The Queen laid to rest her beloved husband, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. Yet, at the same time, the deputy First Minister and other Sinn Féin Ministers were calling on us all to heed the advice when they were devising means whereby they would apply a different standard.

Let it be remembered that my colleagues and I on the Policing Board — I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board — supported bringing in HMICFRS to carry out this review. Therefore, we will not shy away from addressing the issues that it has raised or the commentary that it has made. We will now apply ourselves to ensuring that everything is done to address the concerns raised.

We should also remember that we still do not know the outcome of the review of the decision of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) or whether the Police Ombudsman will carry out an investigation. Therefore, there is some way to go in bringing this matter to a conclusion.

The PSNI's handling of the events and its engagement with the organisers, which the PPS and Her Majesty's inspectorate have concluded provided a reasonable defence from prosecution, have contributed to long-standing concerns and the lack of confidence in policing, particularly in the unionist and loyalist community.

**Mr Speaker:** Will you bring your remarks to a close, Mr Storey?

**Mr Storey:** I am glad that those concerns were recognised by the Chief Constable yesterday. We will work with the police and our communities to ensure that there are no double standards when it comes to applying the law.

**Mr G Kelly:** Mervyn Storey did not once mention that the family of Bobby Storey is grieving, but it is. Bobby Storey was a bad loss to his family and many others. Perhaps, in the middle of this, it is worth remembering that another family is involved. I accept entirely that people, including other families, were hurt. I have said that on a number of occasions, as have other Members.

This was the third, possibly fourth, investigation into these events. As the result of each comes out, the DUP does not accept it. Mervyn Storey said that there is to be another review, and there will be. The review of the PPS decision is yet to come.

I understand that Mr Storey wants things to be corrected, because some criticisms were made. However, I make it very clear that HMICFRS said that there was no bias or preferential treatment by the police at the funeral. The terms used were that the actions of the police came nowhere near the threshold for disciplinary action against anybody involved. Of course, it took different legal advice from that taken by the PPS and came to the same conclusion.

Therefore, at some stage, instead of just rejecting every report that comes along, maybe we will get to the point at which we can move on. A family is grieving, and it also has to move on. Every time this comes up, it affects the family as well. Maybe we can take some cognisance of that when we deal with this. I say that with an understanding of the hurt caused on that day. In the end, my appeal is that we move on.

Sorry, I should have started by declaring an interest: I spoke to HMICFRS. I was, of course at the funeral, and I am a member of the Policing Board.

**Mrs D Kelly:** We welcome the HMICFRS report. As a member of the Policing Board, I will have to reflect further on its findings. A number of issues with the planning of the funeral were raised.

This is not a green and orange issue, and I would regret its ever turning into one. Mr Storey's family is grieving, but so are the families of over 2,000 others, people who were unable to be at the bedside as their loved one gasped for breath. They were not there when their loved one was being lowered into the ground. Whilst there are many criticisms of the regulations in this report, and there are questions about the interpretation of the regulations by the Health Department's legal adviser and the interpretation of HMICFRS's legal advisers, the spirit of the regulations was clear. As I have said on numerous occasions, the infographics on the motorway for anyone travelling down to Belfast stated, "Stay at home", or asked, "Is your journey essential?". Indeed, on many occasions in the lead-up to this funeral, the deputy First Minister asked people to stay at home and not to go out if they did not need to do so.

I note that the police, quite rightly, put safety and security above the COVID regulations in a broader sense, but there are questions about from where the violence would come had COVID regulations on funerals, or the spirit of those regulations, been implemented by the police in the way that they have been at other funerals. I know that the police spoke to mourners at funerals in and around the Lurgan area because there seemed to be a large number of cars outside churches. I also know that priests who officiated at funerals advised mourners in advance that they should not even gather in church grounds or cemeteries and should be very aware of and alert to their individual responsibilities to keep themselves and others safe.

People can spin it in whatever way that they want. The police have questions to answer about the planning. Political leaders have to help to rebuild the confidence in policing that is vital to any democracy.

Let me be clear: in my view and in that of many ordinary people who knew what the spirit of the regulations meant, there is a political elite in the republican movement — Sinn Féin, in particular — who believes that the regulations do not apply to it. That is where a lot of the blame lies.

**Mr Nesbitt:** If I had lost a relative or loved one, I would be appalled if we were still debating that loss in the public square 11 months on. It did not have to be like this. The funeral could have been done differently.

I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. Yesterday, I was there for the briefing from HMICFRS and to receive the report. The three priorities for the police were to avoid "serious disorder", to avoid the trappings of paramilitaries and:

*"a perhaps distant third ... there should be no serious breach of the Regulations."*

I hear the criticism that the regulations were confusing, but I also remember the gold commander coming to the Policing Board in April and saying that he and his team were clear about the regulations.

HMICFRS stated that those three priorities are a matter of "moral and political" judgement. Politically, I understand that, with policing, there is a balance to be found and a

choice to be made between upholding the letter of the law and maintaining the peace. You do not send policemen in riot gear into the middle of a funeral. I get that, but you negotiate beforehand. The problem is that there is no proper paper trail. Do you know what it reminds me of, Mr Speaker? RHI. Remember that Sir Patrick Coghlin told us that it was government by Post-it notes. Where is the paper trail that records the communications between the funeral organisers and the PSNI? The problem with the lack of such a paper trail is that many people will suspect that the trade-off was very simple and that the PSNI said to the funeral organisers, "Promise us that there will be no volley of shots and no beret or gloves on that coffin and we will back off. We will effectively surrender the streets of west Belfast to the republican movement".

There is evidence in the report of an inspector who was in a vehicle that did not stop at any time because it would have been "interpreted as provocative". He stated:

*"I was getting a clear picture from the steely looks I was getting".*

Can we take part in whatever criminality we want on the streets of Belfast and, when the police come, just give them a steely look and they will back off?

I welcome the Chief Constable's saying that he will now try to rebuild confidence in the community. As members of the Policing Board, we all have a duty to weigh in behind him. The community deserves it, and the officers of the Police Service of Northern Ireland deserve it too.

#### 10.45 am

**Mr Allister:** The report was a whitewash, and it was never intended to be otherwise. Anyone who listened to the interview of Mr Parr on 'The Nolan Show' this morning could have no doubt about that. Here was a man, under interview, who said some amazing things. Of course, the starting point of what is amazing is the primary conclusion that Sinn Féin might be more important on the day than the COVID regulations, which were not just secondary but a very distant third to the thought that might be right and might prevail. This morning, you heard Mr Parr effectively say that matters were delegated to an IRA events company, the name of which he would not give. He would not say whether the company was licensed; indeed, he may never have inquired. When you hear that a gold commander ordered that a helicopter should not oversee the wake event, where hundreds of people were gathered, and that the video cameras were so far back that the footage was useless, the conclusion is inescapable: the streets of west Belfast were deliberately, consciously surrendered on the day of the Storey funeral.

The contrast is not with what would have happened at a loyalist funeral; the contrast is with what happened at the funerals of ordinary folk, who were deprived of the basic rights that attend a funeral and were required to obey. When it came to Sinn Féin, however, it called the shots. There might not have been any shots over the coffin on that occasion, but there were certainly shots called by Sinn Féin. We had the despicable scene of our compliant Chief Constable toadying to all of that. What he did on that day means, in my book, that confidence in him is incapable of ever being restored.

Then we discover —.



**Mr Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close, Mr Allister.

**Mr Allister:** Then we discover that the rules were changed by the Executive the night before. That is another story altogether.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Allister, bring your remarks to a close, please. Thank you very much.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I thank Mr Storey for proposing the Matter of the Day. It is the responsibility of everyone to help maintain and build confidence in policing. It is not good enough for elected representatives and others simply to take perceived grievances and amplify them. It is up to us to lead, follow due process and allow the police to be properly scrutinised, instead of jumping on a bandwagon. The report has carried out that scrutiny, and I hope that people are now mindful of the consequences of their previous statements on the matter. That is not to say that the PSNI was perfect in its handling of the events around that funeral, even if, according to the report, they were “not especially serious failings”. My colleague John Blair MLA will continue in his role on the Policing Board to ensure that the recommendations on consistent engagement and, in particular, record-keeping are followed by the PSNI. It is a matter of utmost importance that the Policing Board now be allowed to focus on the work of looking at issues that are in the interests of all people and their safety.

The report demonstrated that it is not the case that the threat of violence influenced policing, as some assert. In every police operation, there are risks and challenges that need to be weighed up to maintain public order. For example, some claim that the police did not warn about the funeral being in breach of the health protection regulations: again, that is not the case. We, as elected representatives, need to be careful that we do not continue to fan the flames of tension in our society.

Support for the PSNI and the rule of law is necessary in a civilised society. I recognise that the process continues to evolve as we move through our peace process in Northern Ireland.

Lastly, I record my thanks and those of my party to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services for its diligence in completing the report in a timely manner.

**Mr Clarke:** I will follow what some Members have said about the report. In Jim Allister's words, it was a “whitewash”. Reference was made to bias: none of the Members has indicated that there was a bias towards one community over another. Reference was made to, I think, 2,000 funerals by Mr Allister and others, but those were the 2,000 funerals for people with the coronavirus: there were many other funerals for people who died a natural death.

I do not take away from the grief of this family, but something has been missed. There were 2,000 people recorded on the street that day, but the Member opposite, who declared an interest as being one of the organisers, indicated that they were expecting up to 10,000. I do not know what part of the regulations was confusing, given that the deputy First Minister stood on a podium, on many occasions, and referred to the regulations and even to the changes. Mr Allister referred to the changes to the regulations that were made on the night before. I asked that question yesterday. I felt that Mr Parr was unclear

about what difference the regulations from the day before would have made, because he is hanging his hat on the fact that they were “confusing”. They were not confusing for the undertakers, the ministers of religion or the families who had to make conscious decisions about which family members they could choose to go to their loved one's funeral.

The whitewash is simple. There is the four Es approach, which the gold commander has always talked about. He has pontificated on the television, all the time, on the approach, but only three Es — not four — were used at that funeral. There was intelligence gathering, and reference was made to the distance from which they had to do the intelligence gathering. Why? The fear of violence. As has been said, the silver commander asked for the helicopter to be in the sky, but the gold commander refused. Why did he refuse? The fear of violence. I do not go to many funerals at which I witness violence. Why should there have been violence at that funeral? Who was going to create the violence? It was not going to be the ministers of religion or the undertakers. I can only presume that it was the people in the white shirts and the cavalcade that followed the funeral.

It has been highly disappointing. I do not know how the police can recover from this. To spin it as some sort of bias between one community and another adds salt to the wound. It is not about religion or people's background; it is about the fact that there were rules and the deputy First Minister of this Government was there in clear breach of those rules. She broke the rules, and nothing has been done. It has been nothing but a whitewash. The only thing to come out of the report, for me, is that I have agreed, for the first time, with Mrs Kelly.

**Ms Bunting:** I declare my membership of the Policing Board.

There will be time to go over the report; doubtless, this will not be the last conversation about it. It is extremely disappointing. The police may have been found to have been consistent throughout the pandemic with regard to their evidence gathering and follow-up, but, in light of everything that we have witnessed, it is clear that they were inconsistent in the run-up to the funeral and in their approach and engagement in advance. That is a courtesy that was not afforded to others who knew that the funerals of their loved ones could not and should not be an event involving thousands of people who were invited to attend.

This is not about whether there has been bias in favour of the paramilitaries on one side over those on the other side; this is about whether there was different treatment for the IRA compared with every other citizen in Northern Ireland who knew the regulations, understood them and abided by them. We are all supposed to be equal under the law and equally subject to it, so why should a paramilitary funeral be treated differently and be different? Those questions remain to be answered.

**Mr Givan:** There is no absolution for the Chief Constable in the report or, indeed, for the gold commander. There are even more serious questions for the leadership of the PSNI as a result of the report. There are even more grave concerns for how the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) has conducted itself. We await the review on whether those 24 individuals will be prosecuted, as, we now know, the Police Service had recommended. The report

makes it abundantly clear that the streets of west Belfast were marshalled by an events company that we do not know that Sinn Féin uses regularly and that the author of the report legally could tell the public but ethically has decided not to. The author of the report has engaged in a sanitisation process of the politics of Northern Ireland. That is unacceptable. That is the very problem that the police have in how they go about their operations. They play politics with it, and that has to stop.

My concerns need to be followed up by the Policing Board. My colleagues are asking the Policing Board to instigate the proceedings that can be carried out for the senior leadership of the PSNI. That needs to happen. The chairman of the Policing Board needs to take up his responsibility, and the members of the board need to support my colleagues in what they seek. The Police Ombudsman needs to carry out the report; there should not be any indecision around that. It has to be done. Then the PPS needs to come to the Justice Committee, as the Committee has requested. It needs to give answers on its conduct and the letter to the PSNI rebuking the Chief Constable for making it public that he wanted a prosecution. The author of the report said that it is quite within the rights of the PSNI to do so. What is there to cover up about the PPS and its behaviour? Why is it not coming forward and giving answers when we have sought them? We need those answers.

Primary responsibility for what took place on that day lies at the feet of Sinn Féin: an anticipated 10,000 people, organised by Sinn Féin; a rally held in a graveyard where the burial did not even take place; and a request to change the law one hour before the day of the funeral. Sinn Féin bears that responsibility, but those in the authorities of the police and the Public Prosecution Service need to be held to account as well. My party will continue to do that, because we need to have confidence in policing and confidence in the unionist and loyalist community has been damaged. There is a differential in how the police go about. It is not a perception, and that has to be addressed. There is a huge piece of work for the police to do in addressing it.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the debate on the Matter of the Day.

**Mr G Kelly:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you look at the comments made by Jim Allister around the events company to see if they were acceptable language?

**Mr Speaker:** OK. We will review the Hansard report. Members, please take your ease for a moment.

11.00 am

## Executive Committee Business

### The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Mr Speaker:** The next items of business are motions to approve two statutory rules (SRs), both of which relate to health protection regulations. There will be a single debate on both motions. I shall call the Minister to move the first motion. The Minister will commence the debate on both motions listed in the Order Paper. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. I shall then call the Minister to move the second motion, and the Question will be put on that motion. If that is clear, I shall proceed.

**Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** I beg to move

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

*The following motion stood in the Order Paper:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed that there will be no time limit on this debate.

**Mr Lyons:** I am bringing forward amendment Nos 2 and 3 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021. With your permission, I will focus my remarks solely on those amendments at the centre of today's debate.

Amendment No 2, SR2021/109, was made on 22 April. It brought changes to the regulations to ease restrictions, which came into effect on 23 April and 30 April respectively. From the 23 April, it allowed driving tuition and testing; close contact services on an appointment-only basis; opening of outdoor visitor attractions; outdoor sport organised by a club, or an individual or individuals affiliated with a sporting body or organisation, extended to allow for squad training; competitive outdoor sport organised by a club, individual or individuals affiliated with a sporting body or organisation, with participant numbers not in excess of 100 people and with no spectators to be permitted; and equine assisted therapy and learning (EATL), provided that attendance does not exceed 30 people in total.

It also allowed for practice or rehearsals for bands, outdoors, provided that:

*"the band does not engage in a procession",*

that:

*"the gathering consists only of the band",*

and that:

*"no person in the gathering engages in singing".*

Perish the thought.

From 30 April, it allowed for 15 people from up to three households to meet outdoors at a private dwelling; for the curfew on off-sales and takeaways to be removed; for the reopening of all retail businesses; for the reopening of self-contained tourist accommodation, including holiday homes, static caravans, touring caravans and motor homes; and for outdoor hospitality, both licensed and unlicensed, to reopen with a limit per table of six people from no more than two households, not including children under 12, with an allowance for larger single households and with contact details to be recorded. Lastly, it allowed for the reopening of indoor swimming or diving pools and indoor exercise facilities for individual activity, activity with a carer or carers, or activity with a trainer or coach.

Amendment No 3, SR2021/117, to the Health Protection Regulations was made and came into operation at 6.00 pm on 30 April. That amendment allowed for a provider in receipt of grant funding from the Education Authority (EA) to deliver youth activities for persons aged from four to 25 in an informal setting. The aim of the amendment was to ensure that youth activity programmes, including the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) camps that are planned for the summer, can be delivered.

It also made an amendment to the regulations to clarify that persons from the same household, bubble or party can be seated at the same table in outdoor hospitality without needing to be socially distanced from each other by two metres.

I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

**Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office):** The Health Committee has undertaken the hard work of scrutinising the regulations, and I look forward to hearing from that Committee later in the debate. I will just say a few words about the strategic oversight role of my Committee in these matters.

The Committee for the Executive Office has consistently maintained that there needs to be clear, unambiguous messaging on the nature of restrictions and the need for them. There also needs to be clarity for those who are expected to enforce the regulations. It is encouraging that we are in the position, based on sound evidence, of being able to relax some of the restrictions, and I again pay tribute to those who have borne the brunt of treating people who have become ill, caring for those in need and providing essential services so that we can all keep the economy going. As the restrictions ease, we appeal for caution. We are not out of the woods yet. Sensible precautions need to be maintained so that people can go about their business safely.

The Committee is accustomed to hearing from a range of sectors on the impact and implications of responses to the pandemic. We have a unique opportunity to plan for a constructive and inclusive recovery, and the Committee needs to be part of that conversation. We look forward to engaging with the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the junior Ministers as the pathway out of restrictions progresses.

I would like to make a few points in my capacity as an individual MLA. The amendments that we are discussing today include the reopening of close-contact services such as those provided by driving instructors and hairdressers. Many of us are enjoying the benefits of that, although, as I look across the Chamber, I can see that some of us are

enjoying them more than others. We are also discussing outdoor visitor attractions, outdoor activity centres and outdoor static band rehearsals. I am pleased to say that one of my constituents from a nationalist background was telling me about walking home one evening and hearing a local Orange band practising outside, and he said that it gave him a sense of normality again.

The other amendment concerns educational activities and seating in hospitality settings. On a personal level, I welcome the easements for youth activities. That has enabled me to get back into the work that I do on a Wednesday evening, when I do some volunteering with a group of foreign nationals in the Downpatrick area. They have really enjoyed being able to get back in, engage and have structured activities available for them, as do all the young people who participate in the activities. You can see that, once again, they have a sense of structure and purpose to their evenings and social time, and that critical interaction that they have with adults will help them as they progress through the rest of the year.

It is heartening that the amendments that we are discussing today and, hopefully, in the future are concerned with how we emerge from the pandemic. We all know that there is no return to the status quo. There has been much discussion about what will be the new normal, and I hope that, as these and future amendments progress, the Executive Office will be in a position to place greater focus on our COVID recovery.

We will discuss mental health awareness later today, and mental health, particularly for our younger and older people, is something that we need to pay close attention to, as is high street recovery. I am glad to see that the task force is in operation. There are some issues surrounding its size that need to be ironed out, but I welcome the fact that it is there and will, hopefully, reach out and help high street businesses as they emerge from COVID.

Ultimately, it is welcome that we are moving, step by step, out of restriction and into a place of recovery. As I mentioned, the Committee will need to be part of that recovery, but, equally, the public need to have their voices heard too on their lived experience of the pandemic and the restrictions that we have legislated for. However, for now, we are discussing the continued easing of restrictions, and I am glad to support today's amendments.

**Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health):** First of all, I welcome that we have over one million people in the North now vaccinated with their first dose and that over half a million people have been fully vaccinated. The vaccination programme has been a great success and has provided for the gradual easing of the restrictions that we are considering today and will consider in the future. I encourage all those who are eligible to get on to the system and book their vaccine, as it is one important element on the road to recovery and will provide protection to them, their friends, their family and their community as we ease restrictions.

It is also important to note that the system of find, test, trace, isolate and support must continue to play a role as we go forward.

In that respect, it is worrying that we have now seen cases of the Indian variant here in the North and that they are rising. We hope that the procedures and processes in place will allow those isolated instances to be contained,

rather than there being further transmission of the variant. Find, test, trace, isolate and support will be key to that. I note the latest research that seems to indicate that the vaccines are effective against the Indian variant. That is another reason for everyone to ensure that they get vaccinated as soon as possible.

Today, our thoughts are very much with those in hospital with COVID-19, all who face this virus across the world and every one of our families and individuals who have suffered the loss of someone as a result of this horrible virus. We have all seen the harrowing pictures of the spread of the virus in India. It was good to see that we supplied assistance to India in the form of generators. International solidarity in that respect is hugely important, and we need to remember that, in an interconnected world, if anyone is at risk, we are all at risk. Helping and reaching out to others across the world is the right thing to do at this time, and I welcome that.

We welcome the introduction of these rules and the continued easing of restrictions that we see at present, which includes the ability — crucial for many people — to meet more friends. There is also further easing for sports, gyms and hospitality, which we all recognise as being hugely important for our social and mental health and well-being.

Last week, during Mental Health Awareness Week, the Committee met a number of groups and many young people to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on them. A number of young people highlighted the fact that they missed school, sport and social interaction with their friends. One mentioned that they missed discos. That highlights the important role that relationships play in improving our well-being, and the fact that these rules will allow more access to our friends and family is welcome. It is absolutely brilliant — I think that we all agree — to see children and young people out and participating in sport again. Long may that continue.

Again, I need to state that this is a process. I urge everyone to continue to follow the guidance and regulations that are in place and not to push or bend the rules. It is important that we follow the rules and guidance as they are eased, because, ultimately, this will allow us to move more quickly to the point where COVID has less impact on our lives.

The Committee was briefed on the regulations at its meeting on 6 May. The Department's briefing gave Committee members the opportunity to discuss the regulations in more detail, and a number of issues were raised. Members continued to raise the issue of the change of messaging from "Stay at home" to "Stay local". There were concerns about the definition of "Stay local" and how that would be enforced by the PSNI. We were advised that the issue is under consideration by the Executive. Members raised a number of other issues, including engagement with the hospitality sector, plans to pilot non-socially distanced events in the North and cross-border travel.

There is continued frustration among members of the Committee at the limited opportunity that the Committee has to consider COVID-related rules. I acknowledge the Chair of the Executive Office Committee's remarks on the hard work involved, but the Committee would like to be able to scrutinise the regulations more effectively,

not only the pace of easing but how we deal with cases where easing might create further problems. I raise the issue every time that I speak about the regulations, and the Committee continues to raise the matter with the Department. We understand that there are tight time frames. However, the Committee's role is to scrutinise legislation, and the process leaves the Committee unable to undertake that role effectively. If the junior Minister could indicate any ideas that are being discussed that might improve our consideration, it would be greatly appreciated. However, the Committee agreed to recommend that the Assembly approve the regulations.

**Mrs Cameron:** I welcome the continued progress that we enjoy towards restoring freedoms and normality and towards helping us to get all aspects of our lives back. I met the announcement of the provisions in SR2021/109 with particular joy. They mean the much-awaited return of my regular visit to the hairdresser. It was most certainly justified. I thank my good friend Emma at Sheer Madness in Antrim for sorting out my lockdown hair. That and the much-anticipated event of having a bite to eat and a beer with best friends at our local make us all appreciate the simple things in life that, until this last year, we very much took for granted.

#### 11.15 am

While it is OK to joke, it is also worth remembering that the sacrifice that we have asked of those in close-contact services and hospitality and their businesses has been incredible. I say thank-you to them. The role that they have played in helping to control COVID has been significant. The mitigation measures that they have put in place for continued client safety is greatly appreciated. Resumption of driving lessons and testing is also very welcome.

These regulations signal the reopening of our retail sector. Our high streets have borne the brunt of restrictions. Shutters have been down, and, sadly, some businesses have not reopened and will never reopen. I commend my party colleague Diane Dodds who, as Economy Minister, has supported so many businesses throughout Northern Ireland to stay alive and keep jobs in place. It goes without saying, too, that the support that we have received from our Government at Westminster has been unprecedented, showing once again that we are better in the Union of the United Kingdom. We need to continue to support businesses. Key to that, of course, is increasing the number of people who are vaccinated. I encourage everyone to take up the offer of a vaccine when it comes to them. Help us to look after each other in the most supportive way possible and, in doing that, help the recovery of health and the economy.

The restoration of consumer confidence in terms of safety in shopping, eating out and heading out for a coffee or a drink with friends is vital. In this space, we need to do more to see further easing of restrictions in order to allow our hospitality industry to recover. More households and larger groups must be facilitated. We need common sense to be applied in the use of new outdoor installations at restaurants and bars, given the huge investments and efforts that businesses have made to comply with the regulations. The announcement of the reopening of caravan parks was particularly welcomed by many constituents. Who knew that so many people had caravans? That freedom to return to what many refer to as

their “happy place” is a huge step forward and will do much for people’s mental health.

We are making great progress. Next steps must focus on human relationships. Indoor mixing to allow families to reconnect, that hug from a friend that we have all longed for, all the family getting together and seeing granny and granda inside — how special will those moments be? We all have friends and family within the common travel area, and, by now, we are desperate to see each other. We look forward to further announcements that will restore more freedoms to us. Allowing us to holiday at home must include freedom to travel within the UK in particular, given the incredible vaccination roll-out programme, in order to support our rebuilding of the economy. While we remain vigilant to new variants, we must keep moving ahead.

I again urge everyone to take up both doses of the vaccine and to continue to act responsibly. I fully support the Chair of the Health Committee’s view that the test, trace, protect system must keep up the good work that it has done to date, especially in light of any new variants. I support both motions.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I support the regulations. I do not intend to say a lot in the debate. It focuses on two amendments, one of which is relatively minor. I will start by passing on my sympathies to those who have been bereaved since we last debated the health protection regulations in the House. I put on record my enduring support for those who work in our healthcare facilities. As of yesterday, we were down to a total of 32 patients in hospital, with only two patients on a ventilator. I send my best wishes to them all for a speedy recovery.

I recognise that 23 April was a significant date as it enabled the reopening of close-contact services with relevant mitigations. This was earlier in the process than when we emerged from the previous lockdown, and I know that it was of huge benefit to customers and businesses alike. Clearly, the reopening of gyms and other leisure facilities works alongside the reopening of sports training and competitive matches. That enables people not only to participate in sport and activity once again but to enjoy low-risk social contact, which has to be good for the mental and physical health of our nation.

The recent easement announcements will be hugely welcome, not only for those in the hospitality trade but, as others said, for those who want to get together in relatively normal circumstances. I remain concerned, however, by some of the exceptions and the seeming lack of input from what we are learning, or could be learning, from contact tracing. The Chair and Deputy Chair of the Health Committee raised that issue.

First, it is obvious from the figures that case rates in the border areas, particularly in the north-west, are among the highest in the UK. If we proceed with easing of restrictions in all of Northern Ireland, how do we manage the reality of the divergence among case rates in different areas? Secondly, how much do we know about the origin of the transmission of variants? We have been told that, with the opening of schools and hospitality at the same time, we will inevitably see cases rising. Are we content with that in the context of the variants that are entering Northern Ireland, the impact of which remains uncertain?

Thirdly, should we continue to allow exceptions for premises such as service stations, which is an issue that I

raised with the First Minister yesterday? Unlike restaurants and cafes, they are not required to take contact information and can allow large groups to sit, without their masks on, at the same venue at the same time to eat and drink. Fourthly, are we content that “face coverings” includes visors, the effectiveness of which has been shown to be significantly less than that of masks?

I throw those questions out there in order to ensure that there is better linkage between what contact tracing can tell us and where we need to go with further intervention. The light at the end of the tunnel is beginning to shine more brightly, but care will be required to ensure that the direction of travel remains towards it. As we ease restrictions, caution will remain the watchword. I urge the public to maintain awareness of the three Cs and continue to avoid, namely, close contact, closed spaces and crowds. To add a V to that, the real way out of this is through vaccination.

If we are to limit concerns about variants, we need to ensure that people take up not only their first dose but their second. Many people, because of an adverse reaction to the first dose, are contemplating whether, or deciding not, to get their second. We need to communicate better with those people. A friend whom I tried to convince to get her second jab said, “You are right, Paula. I have actually had worse hangovers”. We need to reassure people that, for the majority of them, the side effects are short-lived.

**Mr Sheehan:** Like everyone else, I welcome the relaxations contained in the regulations. A fortnight ago, we discussed the previous relaxations. I made the point then that caution needs to be the watchword as we move ahead here, because we are not out of the woods yet. At the time of the previous debate, the situation in India was particularly bad. Thousands of people were dying daily, and hundreds of thousands had contracted the virus.

My colleague Colm Gildernew made the point that, while the virus exists anywhere in the world, it is a threat to everywhere. The virus, as far as we know, first came into being in a city in China that most of us had probably never heard of. It was only a matter of weeks before it arrived in Europe, and then it came here. When there is large-scale transmission of the virus, the difficulty is that that increases the possibility of new variants emerging that are resistant to vaccines. That is certainly a concern.

I note that the British Government are already throwing doubt on the possibility of a full opening up of society on 21 June because of the advent across the water of what is known as the Indian variant. That is here now as well. I doubt that Boris Johnson is concerned about the health and well-being of people in Britain, given his previous utterances about piling bodies high.

However, he may be concerned that the Indian variant may undermine his great victory with the vaccination programme. We need to be concerned.

Today, I noticed that public health experts were giving very stern warnings about the Indian variant, and some say that it could be devastating for Europe in the weeks and months ahead. Yesterday, I saw some information that, in England, the case numbers of the Indian variant doubled in four days, from just over 2,000 cases to over 4,000 cases. What will it be in another four days or four weeks? It seems clear that the Indian variant is much more transmissible

than the dominant variant existing on these islands at the minute, which is known as the Kent variant.

I welcome the relaxations, but we need to continue to be vigilant and to be aware that the dangers of the virus are still out there. It has been a challenging year for everyone, and, no doubt, the relaxations will be welcomed by most people. However, as I said at the outset of my contribution, caution must be the watchword in the time ahead.

**Mr McNulty:** I support the amendments and I offer my sincere condolences to every family that is still grieving for loved ones who were lost to COVID. I rise in solidarity with people who are the driving force of our economy in high streets, town centres and villages: those involved in close-contact services, such as beauticians, hairdressers and barbers; those involved in retail and hospitality, such as workers in restaurants, bars, hotels, and caravan and camping parks; and those involved in business services, like accountancy and law firms. Those people have endured a lot throughout the pandemic, and they will be delighted to be able to get back to their lives, passions and livelihoods, so I very much welcome the relaxations on their behalf.

From a personal perspective, I am delighted that the gyms are open, that the leisure facilities are back in play and that sport has recommenced. It is absolutely fantastic, but it still pains me and so many passionate sportspeople to have to watch our sports team on TV. I hope that we will be able to attend sporting matches and events in person soon.

I second the comments and notes of the previous contributor. Whilst I welcome the relaxations, it is also important that we urge caution. We need to maintain vigilance and to understand that the Indian variant, as mentioned, presents a wholly different threat.

Having said that, I want to see clarity soon from an all-island perspective, especially in relation to weddings. We have so many young couples who are excited about their big day that is planned for the coming months. They do not know whether they can have it in the North or the South, how many people will be able to attend or whether they will be able to have a boogie. You cannot have a wedding without a boogie. I hope that there will be clarity on that very soon.

I hope that, as the Communities Minister alluded to in the last few days, we will be able to go to a concert safely. I hope that practices and procedures are put in place to allow that, and I want to be back supporting Armagh as soon as possible. I support the amendment regulations.

**Mr Allister:** It is not the first time that the prevalent issue that is constantly raised with me by constituents is one that I have yet to hear answered satisfactorily in the House. The question is this: why is there such gross disparity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom when it comes to the easements?

We are told that infection levels are similar and that vaccination levels are similar. We have not heard about the R number for a while. Maybe the Minister will tell us exactly what the R number is currently, but, from what we know, it seems to be similar. Yet the pace of easements is totally out of kilter.

### 11.30 am

It is not as though the Executive cannot move at speed when they want to. This morning, we had a reminder of that when we heard that, one hour before the day of the Storey funeral, the Executive were able, apparently without health advice, to change the number of people who could legitimately attend a funeral. Yet, when it comes to the generality of these regulations, we are dragging our feet. Why is that? Many people would like a clear, convincing answer to that.

Is it because we are being held back by the Republic of Ireland — a place, it seems, a Member of the House from East Londonderry thinks that it is appropriate to visit for non-essential purposes? Why is it that we are being held back? Where are, and what will be, the protections for the people of Northern Ireland if there are upsurges in the Irish Republic? In the past, we saw how the Irish Republic authorities took action to inhibit travel from Northern Ireland. I do not think that we have ever seen anything the other way about. Is there an issue there? Are we yet getting full and proper cooperation from the Dublin Airport authorities and the Government in the South, through which, I imagine, those matters are channelled, or is there still a lag and a lack of clarity on those issues?

There are a number of other matters that we need clarity on. Yes, slowly but surely, we are definitely moving in the right direction. However, as we come into warmer weather, is it still necessary, for example, for churchgoers or others who go to indoor events, as they become permissible, to actually wear masks if they are socially distanced? A mask is very uncomfortable to wear for any length of time. Is that necessary? Will that be addressed?

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. I, too, have raised that issue repeatedly. Further to that, does he agree that it is also imperative that we look at the evidence for mask-wearing by children, who find it particularly difficult in the warmer weather to go about their everyday business? There is a self-confidence issue as well. Surely we should be looking at further evidence on how that affects them.

**Mr Allister:** Yes, and that brings me back to my very first point about disparity. As I recall, in GB, schoolchildren are no longer required to wear masks. It is the same virus, and we are in a similar situation of threat, so why is it that schoolchildren here are still required to wear masks?

We have had some movement on the number of people who can meet and gather outside, and we have had talk about summer clubs and all that. However, is it permissible for youth organisations, for example, to organise weekends away? When will it be fully permissible? All those things, like the Twelfth of July celebrations, which I raised yesterday at Question Time, have a long organisational lead-in. It is not much use to tell a youth organisation in mid-July that it can now organise weekends away, because those events take time and effort to organise. We need guidance, indications and directions now, not then. I urge the Minister to address those things with considerable urgency.

Then there is the whole issue of disparity in enforcement, and it is back in particular focus this morning. We were told many times about the four Es: engage, explain, encourage and enforce, yet, I am presently dealing with a case in my constituency where, two weeks ago tomorrow, a family

thought it appropriate to celebrate the 18th birthday of their daughter. So, they invited to a marquee that they erected in their garden 13 other girls who are in the same school bubble. When parents started to arrive to collect the kids between 11.00 pm and 11.30 pm, the PSNI turned up and issued £200 fines to every kid who was 18, and to those who were still 17, they issued a community resolution notice to take home to their parents to require them to sign it. The kids who were about to go home at 11.30 pm were retained on the premises, in close proximity, until 2.00 am, one of the reasons being because the PSNI had to travel back to Ballymena to get the ticket books. Then, when they came back, a police officer sat in the middle of the group of kids with his mask down round his neck. There was no engagement, no explanation and no encouragement, just enforcement.

The House will not be surprised to hear that those families are beyond irate, and rightly so. Of course, it is necessary to enforce regulations, but they need to be enforced in a consistent and sensible manner. Where was the sense in keeping kids who were about to disperse for another two and a half hours in the very proximity that was the objection and the cause of the complaint? Where were the first three Es of the four? I have been in correspondence with the Chief Constable's office since the morning after, but I cannot even get an answer. Why is that? Maybe I should go to Mr Parr. He seems to have a particular take on regulations. Some of these matters are being dealt with in a really shameful manner.

I trust that the Minister will take back some of those issues and that we will begin to see advancement in how these matters are dealt with. I think that I mentioned, the last time that we debated these regulations, a north Antrim coffee shop that had its outdoor facility at the rear of the premises closed when enforcement officers from the council took a totally different attitude from that which they had taken back in July. Yet, a few days later, I was walking past another well-known hostelry on the north Antrim coast, and I looked to see whether it had 50% of its roof covered — not at all. It is in the same council area, with the same enforcement officers, but a different law. That is how law gets brought into disrepute.

I will say to the Minister that, although it is not his direct responsibility, the message needs to get through that, if the regulations are to retain any traction of credibility and enforceability, enforcement needs to be even-handed. Through this debate, I say to the Chief Constable: will you please reply to me about the 13 kids in Ballymena who were ill-treated in the sense that they were not fairly treated?

**Mr Robinson:** I will be brief. Thank you for letting me in, Mr Speaker. First and foremost, we must all still act responsibly with this horrific virus, which has caused so much death and devastation to families not just here but right throughout the world.

We are coming to the conclusion of the Irish League football season. Are there any plans to extend the spectator capacity beyond the 500-spectator ceiling for the last few exciting matches of the season, provided that the rules and regulations are strictly adhered to by the respective clubs?

**Mr Buckley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Robinson:** I am finished.

**Mr Buckley:** Oh. Sorry.

**Mr Lyons:** I welcome today's debate on the amendments to the health protection regulations. I thank Members for their contributions.

I will move directly to some of the comments that were made and, in particular, the questions that people raised with me. Mr Gildernew raised a number of issues about scrutiny that he wanted me to address. That is subject to ongoing consideration between the Department of Health and the Speaker's Office. Hopefully, changes will be identified that will assist in keeping the good work of the Health Committee and the Assembly moving forward. I recognise the sense of frustration that there will be about that because it has been raised a number of times. I have spoken to colleagues about the need for the Assembly to have its scrutiny roles. I hope that that will continue.

Mr McGrath is no longer with us, but I completely agree with the points that he made, particularly those about youth activities and the need to get them opened up again. For some, it is important diversionary work, and it is also good for young people's mental health. That was raised by a number of Members today. I have continually raised, at the Executive and in the Chamber, the mental health problems that we have been storing up for ourselves throughout the pandemic as a result of the restrictions. That is one of the reasons why we need to ease them as quickly as possible, as long as it is safe to do so.

Pam Cameron, along with the Chairman of the Committee, raised the test, trace and protect work. Of course, we reiterate the importance of business owners collecting those details, because it will assist in a huge way in making sure that we trace cases and will help to break transmission.

Paula Bradshaw raised a number of issues, and I want to pick up on her point about service stations. We talked about that situation at the Executive, and we are looking into how it can be changed. The Member will be aware that we wanted to keep the stations open so that people, especially those involved in transport, have somewhere to go to have a rest, which is an important part of their job. It is also about safety. Unfortunately, a lot of people seem to be going to service stations with family, friends and all sorts. That is clearly not what was intended. That is being looked at.

Mr Sheehan raised the need for us to have caution. There are a number of strains of the Indian variant, as it is known. Those are being kept under consideration. Obviously, that feeds into the decisions that we make.

It will always be a balancing act between being cautious and recognising the impact that it is having on our economy and on mental health. The Executive take these issues very seriously.

#### 11.45 am

Mr McNulty raised a number of issues. He hopes to hear live music soon. He talked about boogies, and Mr Gildernew talked about discos, so we can see a lot of passion on that side of the House. I realise that music is, as Mr McNulty said, a significant issue for people on the big day of their wedding. We want to see changes to the restrictions on music, and I hope to push those changes

along. I will give way to my colleague, who may have an interest to declare in this issue.

**Mr Buckley:** No. I thank the Minister for giving way. We have heard about boogies, concerts and sporting events, and I look forward to them all. However, I also look forward to there being, I hope, some sort of normality for the period of festivities around the Twelfth of July. There will be some boogying; hopefully, I will be marching. Will the Minister give us some clarity on the ongoing conversations about the Twelfth? Given the significant lead-in time needed, organisations need clarity on what parades may look like over this summer.

**Mr Lyons:** Absolutely, and Mr Allister raised that issue.

**Mr McNulty:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyons:** I will give way to Mr McNulty first.

**Mr McNulty:** I feel a bit of a John Travolta moment coming on. In all seriousness, young people are very keen to get back to organising their weddings, and they want to know that there can be a large attendance, that their families are able to come along and that they can get onto the dance floor and throw a few moves.

**Mr Lyons:** I would not want to get in the way of that. When the Member got to his feet so quickly, I thought that he was going to tell us of his plans for the Twelfth of July. *[Laughter.]* Mr Buckley, being from not too far away, may be able to keep him informed of what is going on in his area.

I absolutely understand the issues that are being raised. I also understand the importance of lead-in times. Whether it is somebody's wedding, the celebrations on the Twelfth of July or the summer youth activity that Mr Allister talked about, all need lead-in times. The rules cannot be changed days before. That applies particularly to the Twelfth of July, given that forms also have to go to the Parades Commission. It is important that we give certainty and clarity on that as soon as we can. The First Minister and I have put in a request to the Department of Health, and there are to be meetings involving the Grand Lodge, the First Minister and the Health Minister to see how the parades and celebrations can take place. We have to be mindful that they will take place outside. We are repeatedly told that outside is safer than inside, so it is only right that we find a way for this to work. I know that the participants will want this to happen in as safe a way as possible. They demonstrated their commitment and adherence to the regulations by the way in which they conducted themselves last year during the 'Twelfth at Home'. That is to be commended.

Mr Allister raised a number of points, and I hope that I can address some of those. We have alignment with GB insofar as we have our pathway. We are following our document in a data-led way, as is GB. We have to consider other factors. It is correct that the lower vaccination level and increased number of cases in the Republic of Ireland will impact on the decisions that we make. We have to take into consideration the prevalence of the virus there and of course it can cross the border. It is only right and proper that, if we see outbreaks in certain parts of the Republic of Ireland, or perhaps in areas very close to the border with Northern Ireland, we take whatever steps are necessary to stop the spread of the virus. That is important, and we will certainly have to consider it.

The Member also asked about the R number. He can always find that on the Department of Health's website, where it is published weekly, but I have been told that the R rate for cases is stable at around 1.

While there is evidence that the wearing of face coverings has a public health benefit and we are told that they will continue to be required, we have to keep that under consideration. If the rate of transmission is low and we are making progress, it is only right that we look at where they are required. I take Mr Buckley's point about the wearing of face coverings in schools. It needs to be data-led and evidence-based.

Mr Allister raised a number of other issues, particularly on the disparity in enforcement. We have been told time and time again that it is about engage, explain, encourage and enforce, and for the second time in two weeks in the House he has brought to me an example of the disparity in enforcement, this time by the PSNI and last time by the environmental health department of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council. Nothing irritates people more than seeing themselves being held to a different standard than everybody else. I understand his constituent's concern and anger at what took place, because it is very clear that, if the police had turned up at that event, it would have been entirely reasonable for them to have engaged, explained and encouraged people to go home. There is a problem if we are going straight in with fines all the time, because it means that the police are not adhering to what they said that they would do. They need to be held accountable for that, and it is absolutely right that the Member has written to the Chief Constable about it. I hope that the Chief Constable has heard what was said here today, because, whether or not it is an isolated case, it needs to be addressed because it sends out a terrible message. If we want success in the application of the regulations, there needs to be a consistent approach, because, without one, there will not be the required buy-in from the public. That is very frustrating for people.

My sense is that people want to follow the rules and work in accordance with them, so sometimes the police need to explain what they are saying in order to provide a bit more clarity. That is what should have happened. The nonsense of it all, as the Member pointed out, is that the police are trying to stop people from gathering together yet, in trying to enforce the regulations, they are encouraging some of the behaviour that they are trying to stop. A little bit of common sense might come in handy, but the Member has very clearly put his remarks on the record, and I hope that they will be listened to.

Finally, I come to the points made by Mr Robinson, who, in the last debate on the regulations, asked for more spectators to be allowed at sporting events. He must be a very persuasive Member because, just last week, we announced that 500 spectators will be permitted, which is very welcome. The Member has come back looking for more, and I can confirm to him that the Irish Cup final on Friday will be a special exception and a learning event with 1,000 spectators permitted. If anybody has any other restrictions that they want to be relaxed, ask Mr Robinson to raise that in the Chamber, and I have no doubt that changes will be made very soon.

I hope that I have answered as many Members' queries and questions as possible. We are heading in the right direction, and we want to be able to make further changes



and relaxations. I hope that this is the start of many more relaxations to come. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

### **The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021**

**Mr Speaker:** The second motion on the health protection regulations has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*  
— [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

**Mr Speaker:** Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

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

## Committee Business

### Mental Health Awareness Week

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

*That this Assembly notes that the week commencing 10 May was Mental Health Awareness Week, which annually provides the opportunity to highlight the importance of mental health; further notes the 2021 health inequalities report, which identified continuing mental health inequalities; recognises the detrimental impact that COVID-19 has had on the mental health and well-being of the population, including our children and young people; further recognises the positive public health campaigns around mental health, such as Take 5; advocates that people seek support to talk about their mental health; and supports the Minister of Health to achieve parity of esteem between mental and physical health by increasing spending on mental health services, fully implementing the Protect Life 2 strategy and progressing the 10-year mental health and substance use strategies.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Business Committee has agreed to allow one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and a further 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr Gildernew:** Last week was Mental Health Awareness Week. During the week, the Committee for Health met a number of organisations and individuals in order to help us better understand the real impact that COVID-19 has had on our mental health and well-being.

First, I thank all those organisations and individuals that met the Committee over the course of the week. We very much appreciate the expertise and experience of every one of them. I thank the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych), Inspire Wellbeing, Action Mental Health (AMH), the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC), YouthAction, the Children's Commissioner, the interim mental health champion and the #123GP campaign. I especially thank Kirsty and Julie, who shared their lived experience of the help that counselling has provided to them in very difficult circumstances.

I also thank, deeply and sincerely, all the young people who met Committee members last Wednesday night to share with us the impact that lockdown has had on them. A very special thanks goes to Lee, Deirdre, Destinee, Ciara, Orlagh, Jamie, Darragh, Troy and Niall.

We deeply appreciate you all taking the time to share your experience. We all agree that some very good points were raised during the meeting, and, throughout the debate, you will hear from Committee members about some of the comments and suggestions made.

#### 12.00 noon

In today's debate, it is important to reflect on what our young people are telling us about mental health and well-

being. They very articulately outlined that they fear not being heard and that we are not listening to their worries, concerns and fears. They said that, too often, we get stuck talking about — what we all recognise as buzzwords — strategies, implementation and monitoring and that we do not listen to their views, opinions or real-life experience of the very different and difficult pressures they face today. That is the true essence of co-design, whereby people can take ownership and feel that they have been heard and responded to. We need to harness the creativity and energy that young people bring to the debate, not dismiss it. Those young people were very clear that they know what they need and when and where they need it. Hopefully, we can give a voice to those young people this afternoon.

One of the young people outlined how difficult it was to know what services were available to them, and that is coming from young people who are generally tech-savvy and fairly well informed. They outlined that just knowing that support is there and where they can find and access it was, sometimes, all the reassurance that they needed.

One of the other key issues that they highlighted was that they need support at the time of a crisis and that support down the line is often not appropriate. We heard about the long waiting lists and the fact that they cannot access services at the point of need, which, at times, puts them off seeking support. That is a worry. Some of the comments from the young people included them saying, "Give us the right help at the right time", and, "We need help and support services outside Monday to Friday 9 to 5". We need to listen to that and to respond effectively to what they are saying.

During the meeting, they all emphasised how much they missed social interaction with their friends. They said that they missed going to school, participating in sport and going to the local youth club. They also mentioned not being able to go to discos and socialising there, which was effectively put on our agenda during an earlier debate this morning. Many of us here will not be rushing back out to discos any time soon, apart from maybe Justin. I have to say that the Deputy Chair also said not to rule her out in that respect, so I suppose that we will just have to watch that space.

It is very clear that positive mental health is about more than just health services. It is about social interaction, being connected, being active, feeling involved and being heard, which is an important element. It is, therefore, understandable that COVID-19 and the lockdowns have had a significant impact on not only the well-being of our children and young people but everyone who was starved of that social interaction for long periods and is now slowly being allowed to interact more normally. We need to ensure that we support our children and young people through that process. We need to listen to and heed them and to respond effectively.

The young people highlighted the good work being undertaken in the voluntary and community sector, which we in the Chamber recognise, because we have all experienced that. They outlined the work happening in youth clubs, sporting organisations and others to encourage them to discuss their mental health and well-being. They also argued, effectively in my opinion, that sometimes it is easier to talk in a sport setting or at a youth club than it is in school or more formal settings, where they told us that it can, at times, feel like a box-ticking exercise to discuss

mental health. That is not to take away from the massive amount of very good work that is being done in education settings. Again, however, we need to listen to and heed what we are hearing and to respond where we can.

Many of the organisations that we met last week emphasised the size, complexity and sheer scale of the task at hand. We have seen in the media recently the extent of the waiting lists for children and young people to access the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Recent information from the Department states that there are over 900 children and young people on the waiting list for CAMHS, with over 380 waiting more than nine weeks for access to services. That is clearly not good enough for our children and young people. I want to acknowledge, however, that we received a letter from the Minister yesterday, I think, with further information on CAMHS, and I look forward to looking at that in more detail. I welcome the fact that there was an indication that there will be more spend to come, although it is marginal, going from 8% up to 10%. However, some of the things there are a step in the right direction. There is a recognition that the waiting list fluctuates at times as a result of vacancies, and I hope to come back to that later.

It was also stark to hear of the level of service provided by the community and voluntary sector because the trusts do not provide it and to hear that that sector is picking up the slack on all of that. For example, the only counselling service that the Belfast Trust, the North's largest trust, provides is as part of its Lifeline suicide prevention service, and that is at the very top end of the scale.

One of the worrying lines that was repeated a number of times over the week was that there will be a tsunami of additional mental health issues coming out of COVID-19 and that we need to prepare, resource and fund additional access to counselling services in GP surgeries and through the community sector to deal with that oncoming tsunami.

We also received a briefing from the Department on health inequalities. The statistics on mental health inequalities across the North are stark. They are ingrained, and, worryingly, there appears little evidence that the funding of services is sufficiently impacting on those health inequalities. It is important to highlight the fact that behind every one of these statistics are individuals, families and communities that we need to support through the most difficult of circumstances.

Over the past week, we have heard many good examples of work being done in the community and voluntary sector to promote mental health and well-being across our entire population. We have also heard on many occasions about the very positive impact that multidisciplinary teams are having in primary healthcare settings and the real benefits of GP surgeries having access to counselling and talking therapies. What we need now is the financial support and resource to respond. We need increased access to counselling GPs, and we need resource targeted to CAMHS to provide children and young people with access to services that they need, when they need them and where they need them. We need to effectively listen and to put in place the effective responses.

I now want to make a few remarks as Sinn Féin spokesperson for health. I declare an interest in that I previously worked as a social worker. It is widely

recognised in the sector that, if we could do more earlier, we would see the benefit not only for health and well-being but even down the line with cost savings and in supporting people better before the crisis has become a bigger issue. We cannot go further without mentioning the mental health and well-being of carers, who, even before this pandemic, were placing their own health and self-care and mental and physical health before those who they are caring for. This year has been unbelievably tough, and they cannot be left behind any longer. We need support for our carers.

The Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing campaign is a truly and ingeniously simple but effective campaign that promotes positive mental health. I also think that it is important that people think about their mental health and well-being where they work or in their place of study and that employers play a role there too. Securing a good work-life balance is important to mental health and well-being. Finally, and very briefly, we need the workforce. I welcome all of the strategies and all of the plans and recognise that they are genuinely put together, but, if we do not have the workforce, we will not be able to deliver it. Sin a bhfuil uaim.

**Mr Buckley:** I feel a wee bit overwhelmed standing today to speak on Mental Health Awareness Week. It is an issue that has affected so many in this House and in our community. I mentioned in my maiden speech how I was particularly moved to be talking about mental health, given the experiences that I had in school when I lost some of my school friends to suicide. Just last week, some Members may have become aware of the moving story of another one of my constituents who, sadly, took their own life: Luke O'Hara, who was 25 years of age. His mother, Julia McKeever, has taken to the airwaves to highlight the ordeal that her family has been through following Luke's tragic passing. She wants me to highlight today the online forums and the online dangers. Luke committed suicide after accessing an online suicide forum. Unbeknown to his mother and unbeknown to his friends, he had been engaging in conversations on that forum, where they basically showed him how he could take his own life.

Julia has spoken out bravely. It is an issue that, sadly, does not affect only Luke. After her son's passing, Julia was brave enough to look into exactly what happened. She accessed the website, saw the chat and saw how people were encouraging Luke to take his own life. They talked about, "catching the bus". It was truly horrific. When Julia flagged this up via the online account, a message was sent immediately to Luke's personal profile saying, "Somebody has accessed your account. Your mother has accessed it. Please remove her." Julia then went beyond that and accessed it herself, where she saw some horrific stories, one of a 17-year-old girl who said that she was going to commit suicide and asked whether anyone wanted to sit with her while she did it. Julia said that there were others willing to video themselves committing suicide, so that you could see exactly how it happens.

Friends, colleagues, this is truly a sad story for us all. We have heard so many horrific stories. Julia spoke out because, she said, although she had lost her son and would not get him back, she did not want people to go through what she had gone through. We have to recognise the dangers in the world. Online forums are now so far removed from civilisation and reality that, I am afraid, we are just papering over the cracks with positive words of encouragement. Much as those are needed, there must

be real and meaningful action. I hope that, through my office, the Health Minister might meet Julia to hear about the ordeal that she and her family have been through and search for ways by which we can help tackle this truly horrific practice.

Social media has a lot to answer for. We have seen the bullying and abuse. Many elected representatives have faced that. Many members of our community continue to do so. There does not seem to be the support structures that should be in place. The Assembly needs to look for ways in which it can help and be part of the conversation, so that people can show and treat each other with basic courtesy and respect.

Luke was diagnosed with autism at 14 years of age. There is no doubt that he was a vulnerable young man. Those online forums preyed on that vulnerability.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Buckley:** I will indeed.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for sharing that story. I would like him to have the extra minute for taking the intervention.

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

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Minister for that.

It was a truly horrific experience, as an elected representative, to listen to Julia's narrative. I helped Luke and his family in cases before this happened. His mother described the scene when she arrived at Luke's flat, with police in forensic suits and ambulance crews knocking in doors. She had to unravel the story of what happened to her son through that means. It is truly horrific.

I am not the only Member who can claim to know about such stories. Members have all heard of the horrific ordeal of suicide and the mental health issues that face our community. As I have been saying since I first came to the House, I sense genuine, cross-party support for those facing the ordeal of poor mental health and suicide. I hope that, collectively, as an Assembly and a society, we can put the support structures in place and help those vulnerable young people and, indeed, our society in general.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker and Minister, for giving me an extra minute.

**Mr Durkan:** I begin by reaffirming the importance and value of speaking openly and honestly about mental health struggles. No one is immune from the toll that daily life and its challenges take on our mental health. However, thanks to campaigns like Mental Health Awareness Week, the stigma surrounding mental health is slowly but surely eroding. We are moving into an age where parity of esteem is within reach. Evidence of that is the Executive's commitment to mental health. It has been placed firmly on the agenda, largely thanks to the many charities, families and, in particular, young people who have lobbied to put it there and keep it there.

### 12.15 pm

Every time that I visit schools or talk to young people, I find that the real, burning issue is mental health. In our younger generation, there has been a real, tangible shift

towards a culture of openness and having the confidence to talk about how they feel, and I am encouraged that the future of Northern Ireland lies in the hands of such an impassioned and considerate generation, whose common goal is the betterment of our society for all. In the here and now, we must inhabit that same can-do spirit. Mental health does not discriminate. It affects every community. It is a shared interest of all parties in the Chamber, and, as such, it must be a shared responsibility for us all.

Undoubtedly, this year more than most, mental health has been brought into sharp focus. This Mental Health Awareness Week and its befitting theme of nature have provided a moment of reflection for all and an opportunity to put aside time for self-care and to reconnect with our natural world. The year 2020-21 has been the most tumultuous and challenging period in living memory. Every one of us has carried the burden of anxiety. Sadly, in many cases, we have suffered loss, whether that is the loss of a loved one, financial security or just independence. A recovery period for our mental health should *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I am afraid that technology has let us down.

**Mr Durkan:** I am under no illusion that the mental health question has been answered. It has been and will remain the biggest hurdle for the Executive to overcome in a post-COVID landscape. While it is good to talk, that sentiment falls flat without appropriate support being in place. In my constituency of Foyle, the vital Community Crisis Intervention Service (CCIS) has once more found itself in the all-too-familiar position of being threatened with closure. The funding clock is ticking, and it has been forced to again present the begging bowl. It is regrettable that such a service is necessary in the north-west, but it is scandalous that such a vital service is forced to fight year-on-year for survival.

Thousands here are waiting to access mental health care, and Northern Ireland persists in being the perennial black spot in these islands, as it has the highest levels of mental health issues. We cannot and should not resign ourselves to that fate. It is incumbent on us all to rise to the challenge and to not shy away from the shocking statistics, because behind every statistic is someone's loved one who is desperate for support. We owe it to them to come together to demand different thinking and to develop creative solutions to ensure appropriate and accessible models of care at the first point of contact. One solution that we have touched on is the role of GP surgeries and in-house counselling as laid out in the #123GP campaign. It is vital that GPs are resourced to provide effective and timely support in the months ahead.

If we can take any positive from this desperate year, it has to be the reconnection with nature. Embracing a greater connection to the natural world is a simple but effective option that can work wonders for improving well-being. It is that kind of thinking that we need to see embedded in our health service. Small, simple steps can make a huge difference.

It is imperative that the Executive now take the big steps to prevent the North sleepwalking from one pandemic into a mental health pandemic. No one should be left to suffer on ever-increasing waiting lists. Time is of the essence with mental health matters, and it is vital that we lay the

groundwork to ensure that no one is left behind. As MLAs and politicians, let us start with ourselves. We churn out phrases, lecture and pontificate to our constituents to be kind —

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

**Mr Durkan:** — but we revel in [*Inaudible*] each other — one second, Mr Deputy Speaker — as political opponents and even colleagues, with little or no regard for the impact that public humiliation, scurrilous rumours and scandal have on people who are already under massive strain and carry the worries and problems of their constituents.

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

**Mr Durkan:** Let us be kind to each other.

**Mr Chambers:** I am pleased that the Health Committee, on which I serve, has once again demonstrated its recognition of and concern about the scourge of mental illness in our community and has tabled this important motion.

The public should be reassured that we have a Health Minister who is aware of the extent of the mental health issues that we face and that he has recently appointed a mental health champion to give the issue a public and independent voice. He is committed to putting in place the necessary actions to tackle the problem.

Mental ill health is unlike many other illnesses, in that there may be no visible indications that a person is suffering. Many people feel that talking about their problem will be seen as a sign of weakness that may put their career or reputation at risk. It can also place an intolerable strain on the close family trying to deal with behaviour that they may not understand or recognise in their loved one. The message that it is good to talk is a valuable first step for someone starting the journey to overcome their difficulties. Battling mental health issues is a recipe for a further decline into what can become a very dark place. Talking and seeking help are not signs of weakness; rather, they are signs of strength.

The COVID pandemic has undoubtedly increased the circumstances for more of our citizens to begin to suffer from mental health issues. Financial problems caused by a loss of income for workers and business owners can be one major trigger. For others, the loss of a daily routine and missing the comfort of personal contact with friends and neighbours can be the trigger. Many find comfort in attending church to worship and, importantly, to participate in the social activities and fellowship provided by broader church life, and the loss of that is also a possible trigger. Fear of contracting COVID, especially among those considered vulnerable, is another potential trigger.

Young people make up the largest group exposed to many of the trigger points for developing mental health issues. With the closure of schools for long periods as an appropriate protection against the spread of the pandemic, the most important part of their life was taken out of reach. Outdoor play and social contact with their peers were taken from them, perhaps without their full appreciation of the reasons. All those situations were created solely by the COVID virus, and it is understandable that as more mental health issues developed, all the focus and efforts were on fighting the virus.

Now, as we continue to make a slow return to normality, the damage has been done to the mental health of many across the age groups in our community. I welcome the funding that the Minister has directed towards the voluntary and charity groups that offer mental health support. Those organisations will be the front line as we move forward and will provide triage and pathways for those who may need more in-depth help to recover.

I hope that the motion will lead to the timely interventions that other Members highlighted. I support everything that the Minister is doing to deal with mental health, and it is important that all parties in the Chamber pledge that the ring-fenced funding that he needs will be provided. We will all be judged by our actions rather than our words. We cannot afford to fall short on mental health. The Ulster Unionist Party fully supports the motion, and we support all actions taken to tackle this issue.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I echo the thanks from the Chair of the Health Committee to the organisations and individuals who engaged with us last week.

Mental health is so far-reaching that it impacts on every one of us in many different ways throughout our lives. It covers everything from low mood to post-traumatic stress disorder. Today, I will focus on an issue that still has a degree of stigma and something of a taboo attached to it, and there are very few support services for it. I have not spoken about this in a while: the issue is the mental anguish and emotional damage caused to children and parents in cases of parental alienation and court-induced child estrangement. Before I make my substantive remarks, I make it clear that I am talking about situations in which the parent is loving, caring and poses no risk to the child.

First, I will focus on the child who, through no fault of their own, has found themselves in an acrimonious split, bitter custody battle, protracted court processes and general unhappiness in whatever home they are living. That results in their having only one parent in their life, one side of their family and, in particular, only one set of doting grandparents, and being encouraged to have hate and bile in their heart towards their absent or, as they are termed, “targeted” parent. That is child abuse and causes great harm to their sense of being, belonging and self-worth. Many studies show that that internal turmoil manifests itself in many ways through the classroom and social settings, and is carried through into adulthood. I will give a contemporary angle to that. Members received frantic emails and calls to their constituency offices from parents who were denied access to their children during the COVID pandemic because the other parent was using it as an excuse. I welcomed, and thanked the Health Minister for, the joint statement with the Justice Minister in which they made it clear that children should continue to move between the two houses.

Secondly, parents are the other victims in these situations. I have spoken to over 100 such parents, and it is fair to say that the majority are men. The constant pain that they suffer from not seeing their child or children is incalculable. The majority of them experience depression from those protracted processes. I know of one man who is fighting through the courts, eight years later, and, despite all sorts of court orders, is still not seeing his children. I appreciate that the Justice and Health Departments are working

on the issue, and I welcome the family support and parenting strategy through the Department of Health, but I am highlighting the human impact of allowing vindictive ex-partners to have the power to have such a devastating impact on the bond between parent and child.

Parental alienation and child estrangement are best described as living grief. It is mourning the loss of a child, even though the child is still alive. I know of many parents who seek support from their GP for depression and anxiety, and take medication. I thank Parenting NI for its dads' project. I know that it supports many parents, but, as far as I am aware, that is the only support that is available across the Province. Unfortunately, many other parents turn to alcohol to numb their pain. I know of some in that group who have lost their jobs.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for giving way. She has been strong on parental alienation for a long time, and I support her in that. Is she aware that some groups deny that parental alienation is an issue? Does she agree that that is one of the harder things to combat and that we need to do more to reinforce the fact that it is real and has a huge impact on people's mental health?

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

**Ms Bradshaw:** It happens; it happened to me. I was estranged from my son for three and a half years. He is back — he is eating me out of house and home — but it happened. It was the worst three and a half years of my life. People can produce as many reports as they want; I am living proof that it happens. As I said, the majority are men. I will probably regret the fact that I said that in about an hour. There is a taboo and a stigma. You feel that you are going to be judged that you were a bad parent.

I will return to what I was saying before the intervention. Some people who turn to alcohol lose their jobs, and that compounds the situation and further impacts their mental health. I am raising this societal problem because there are many situations through which life can change through no fault of your own. You feel that your life is spiralling out of control, and there is a sense of powerlessness. We talk about parental alienation. You do not know who your ex-partner is now with; you do not know whether your child is safe; you do not know how they are getting on at school; you do not know how happy they are. There is no greater pain for a parent than experiencing that. However, there are all sorts of pain in life: bereavement, especially in the case of death through suicide, as Mr Buckley raised today; miscarriage; or even a car accident that results in lifelong injuries.

In conclusion, I thank all the charities and community organisations across the country that provide counselling and well-being programmes. That localised support provides immense support in times of need and is greatly appreciated.

### 12.30 pm

**Ms Brogan:** I thank the Health Committee and its Chair for bringing the motion to the Assembly today. It has already been a really worthwhile debate, and I appreciate all the contributions. I am, of course, speaking in support of the motion, and I welcome the discussion. I join my colleagues Paula Bradshaw and Colm Gildernew in acknowledging the organisations, charities and staff that work so hard in

the area of mental health and provide important support to the people of the North. Mental Health Awareness Week provided us with an opportunity to show our appreciation for the work that they do. It also raises awareness of mental health issues and highlights the importance of promoting good mental health.

We have heard time and time again about the rising rate of mental health issues in the North. It is clear that we are facing a mental health crisis, and there is no doubt that the impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated that. Fear and anxiety swept through our communities as coronavirus swept the globe. Feelings of isolation and depression owing to the exceptional, yet necessary, restrictions were experienced by many of us. Mental health difficulties can affect all ages, genders, races and religions, but, in my capacity as Sinn Féin spokesperson for children and young people and a member of the Education Committee, I will focus on the mental health and well-being of our young people.

Earlier this year, the Education Committee hosted a delegation of young people representing a number of groups, including the Belfast Youth Forum, the Secondary Students' Union of NI, Pure Mental, Crisis Cafe, the Children's Commissioner Youth Panel and the NI Youth Forum. That engagement provided us with an insight into the impact that COVID-19 has had on young people and into their experiences. The main issues highlighted were an increase in anxiety and stress, driven by the uncertainty around GCSE and A-level grading; difficulties with remote learning; loneliness and isolation from their peers; uncertainty about returning to school; and the fear of bringing COVID home to loved ones. A survey of over 2,000 students across the North, carried out by the Secondary Students' Union between November and December 2020 showed that 76% of respondents had experienced mental health problems. That is a startling statistic. It was made very clear to us that more needs to be done to support young people and their mental health needs.

Mental health issues can and do affect people across all categories. They do not discriminate, but support services do. For example, only 40% of GPs in West Tyrone provide an in-house counselling service. It causes great concern that services are not accessible locally or in rural areas. There is disparity among the mental health services and treatment available across the North. As I said, service provision in rural areas is even more limited. I have recently made calls for the Health Minister to improve mental health services in Omagh to meet the demands of the people of West Tyrone. I support calls for increased spending on mental health issues, including for CAMHS.

The mental health champion, Siobhán O'Neill, appeared at the Education Committee and agreed with an assessment made by my colleague Pat Sheehan that, as we emerge from the pandemic, our children and young people are set to face a tsunami of emotional health and well-being challenges. In her evidence to the Committee, Professor O'Neill noted the link between prolonged stress in childhood and mental illness and poor educational performance. Both she and the Children's Commissioner made calls for children's well-being to be prioritised on their return to school. Young people have made huge sacrifices throughout the pandemic to safeguard those most at risk. As we cautiously emerge from the

COVID-19 restrictions, it is our turn to help young people by promoting their well-being and mental health and by supporting resilience and positive mental health actions and behaviours. We also need to improve access to services and outcomes for mental health services, where needed. I ask all to support the motion.

**Mr McGrath:** I also support the motion. I had not originally planned to take part in the debate, but I felt that I wanted to add my voice to it, particularly about young people. Before entering politics here, I spent about 17 years working as a youth worker in the heart of Downpatrick. It is by no means an easy task. I certainly appreciate that it must be more difficult now during the pandemic.

What I know about youth mental health was learned not from working as a councillor or as an MLA but from working directly with remarkable young people as they grew up in my town. Many in the House can attest to the experience of being able to work with young people in various strands. I know that the Chair of the Health Committee, as a social worker, will certainly have worked with young people. Social workers are often forgotten for the work that they do and the interventions that they make in young people's lives. I offer my support to them and to that sector for the work that they do.

Young people, in their own wonderful way, have been crying out for improved mental healthcare, support and provision. We see that on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. It can come across more directly, through arguments and tensions at home or through difficulties in the friendships and relationships that young people have around them. They really want and need to have their voices heard, so that we can respond to them.

Many organisations do great work to support and help young people, such as the facilitating life and resilience education (FLARE) project, which is delivered through the Youth Service and provides great support and interventions for young people across Northern Ireland. Many young people have come to rely on that service. There are other organisations, including the Public Initiative for the Prevention of Suicide & Self-Harm (PIPS) and many others that reach out to and help young people. Our school staff, while juggling everything else that they do, also make time and space available for young people at their time of need. We need to see much more support for the work that is currently happening.

**Mr McNulty:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGrath:** Yes.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Member for mentioning PIPS Hope and Support. In relation to the terribly traumatic story that Mr Buckley shared with us, I encourage Julia to get in touch with PIPS Hope and Support. They have done such important work to destigmatise death by suicide, and they are very helpful in crisis prevention and reaching out to families who are suffering from bereavement. I encourage Mr Buckley to recommend that Julia gets in touch with them.

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

**Mr McGrath:** Thank you very much. Of course I welcome that intervention and the help and support that are available. We heard that heartbreaking story. It would

break our hearts to listen to that story, and I hope that support services are available to all families.

Much work is also needed to allow individual groups to learn from each other. There are so many specialisms and so much dedicated work is taking place across all our communities that it would be great to see opportunities for those groups to get together and share their practice, their strengths and their skills, so that we can develop the work that we do.

Last December, I hosted a youth mental health discussion on Facebook Live. From that discussion came a sense that you cannot change the world on your own but you can help by changing your little corner of it. I welcome the opportunity today to appeal directly to the Health Minister. I hear on the ground that there are real problems in accessing CAMHS and problems with some of the waiting lists that go with that. That is a wee corner that we can try to fix to make services more readily available and more responsive so that we can reach out to young people whenever they are in need.

Young people who are seeking inpatient support are often placed in adult inpatient centres. That is not the appropriate place for them, and it is not the help that they need. It is help, but it is not the bespoke help and space that a young person needs. It would be good to see additional ways of helping to focus on treating those people's individual needs at that time.

Young people are crying out for better mental healthcare and support. They are becoming more open and honest about that. We need to learn their language. As policymakers, an Executive and an Assembly, we need to know exactly what we are listening to from young people, who are telling us exactly what they need. We can then develop and respond through the services and packages that we put in place for them.

I totally support the motion. This sort of debate shows the public the real and human side of politics.

**Mr Butler:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGrath:** Yes, of course.

**Mr Butler:** I will try not to take up too much of your time. Will the Member join me in thanking Pure Mental NI for the toolkits that it has published? Young people are already mobilising and showing us what can happen and what they can do through that cross-departmental approach to supporting mental health.

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Member for that. It is really wonderful to hear. Again, as I mentioned, if there is good practice out there, let us bring it up, amplify it and spread it everywhere, because we —

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

**Mr McGrath:** — have the tools and the ability to respond to this situation. If we bring everything together that is happening, we can do that even better.

**Ms Flynn:** I am happy to speak in support of the motion. I like how people have taken a different focus in each speech, and, without coming across too negative today, I would like to focus our minds on — it will not come as news to the Minister — the pressures that mental health services face at present. We marked Mental Health

Awareness Week last week, and it is important to be aware of the realities and pressures that some of the services are under. Minister, last week, you told the Health Committee in your own words about the increase in referrals and the situation with the bed occupancy rates, which are actually above 100%. We need to take into account the pressures that you, as Minister, and your Department are under in dealing with what is a serious enough situation with mental health capacity.

Sadly, we know that many specialist services are not available or do not have the inpatient beds to provide the care that people need. Since 2015, 142 patients have been referred outside the North for services that were not available locally. Sixty-eight of those related to personality disorders, and 45 of them, as you know, related to eating disorders. That is not right, and it is not good enough. I do not put the blame solely on you as Health Minister, but I think about the people who have to travel to get that treatment. We need to do something to change that, and I appeal to the Minister to consider all the options that are available, including any all-island options. The health services across the island have looked at different services, but we should look at those options to prevent people having to travel long distances to get those specialised treatments.

As has been mentioned, we know that, over the course of pandemic, many patients suffering with severe and diagnosable mental illnesses have deteriorated further.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for giving way. Again, it is not to be negative, but, through questions, we have got some statistics from the Minister's Department. The figures on prescribed medication, particularly antidepressants and medications for anxiety, have increased, particularly in areas of north and west Belfast. We need to look at what support we can give to those people, including talking therapies and holistic approaches.

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

**Ms Flynn:** Thanks very much for the intervention. We spoke about that in the Committee with the Minister, and we have seen the increase in antidepressant prescription forms across almost all constituencies, so it is a worry.

I will just finish off my previous point. The number of patients who have been detained is double this year what it was last year, so it is just to put in the context — Alan raised it — of the impact of the pandemic and how that will increase the pressures on the mental health system.

I will bring it back to health inequalities, which we have covered in our Health Committee. The Minister will be well aware that the biggest health inequality that exists in the North is in relation to drugs and alcohol. We have seen and heard the stats. We do not like to use the term "stats", because it is about people, but you are four or five times more likely to die an alcohol or drug death if you live in one of the most deprived constituencies as opposed to the least deprived. Again, I call on the Department to try its best to get some sort of dual diagnosis system up and running. I know that the Department is looking at the introduction of minimum unit pricing, which is work in progress, but we need to keep working on that stuff at pace.

Someone mentioned the idea that we need targeted funding to capture the areas that are most deprived. Ideally, the Department of Health should ring-fence funding for where it is needed, and, again, I think that Alan mentioned having the support of the Executive to try to ring-fence that funding to save lives. I appreciate that the Minister has just appointed a new director of mental health, which is an important role, and I really wish him all the best in that.

However, I also feel strongly that we need a psychology lead in the North to have a voice and direct input into the discussions and programmes of work that take place at management board level.

#### 12.45 pm

Minister, all the positive actions that are being taken with the strategies — the crisis review, the perinatal services, the money that goes to charities and everything that you have spoken about — are great. It is really good stuff that shows your commitment to mental health, but it is the funding that really worries me. If we cannot break through that 5% to 6% of funding for mental health, it will not have an impact and bring down the number of deaths.

I do not have my glasses, so I am not sure what time I have. To finish, I will ask this: as the threshold to accessing services increases and the waiting lists lengthen, what happens to those who cannot seek the help when they need it? They reach crisis point. We have heard it from Jonathan and others. That is the worry. When you do not get people at the right time, they get to a crisis point. Minister, I have spoken to you many times about why I feel so passionate —

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

**Ms Flynn:** — about the issue. Jonathan encapsulated it: it is when we talk about the families who have lost.

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Health Committee for tabling the motion. Mental health is an important issue. As other Members have done, I intend to talk about something that is quite close to me but also relates to many people in the Chamber and beyond.

This week marks LGBT Awareness Week. Yesterday was International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. It was great to see it being marked. Members will be aware that there are many particular mental health issues that affect LGBT people. Funding for organisations has been hard-fought for and opposed on some occasions. The funding and support that are in place, whilst welcome, leave a lot to be desired.

The Rainbow Project has documented mental health issues in the LGBT community. People find some of the facts difficult to understand, but they are evidenced in the research. One survey found that 35% of LGBT people had self-harmed. It also stated that 70% of respondents had experienced or are experiencing depression: 70%. Almost half — 47% — indicated that they had experienced or were experiencing suicidal ideation. Just over a quarter had made at least one attempt at suicide.

Two of my friends who were gay committed suicide. One of them checked into a hotel, took an overdose and died. That is a reality in my community. The situation has gone on for far too long, and it is extremely clear.



COVID-19 has had a particular impact. We have had numerous lockdowns. Just imagine either being at home, as a result of lockdown, with parents who do not accept your sexuality or gender identity or trying to live in that home if you are not out. There are so many stories of the impact that COVID-19 and the lockdowns have had on people. Another example relates to domestic violence. Those are stories that have not truly been told. They will need to be heard.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for giving way. He has highlighted the importance of peer support. Groups such as Rainbow, HERe NI, Women's Aid and many others have been through similar experiences and have empathy. The Member obviously agrees that it is important that those projects are supported.

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

**Mr Muir:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank Carál for her intervention. That support and those interventions are absolutely vital. We have rightly given credit today for those interventions. They need to do more, whether the support comes from third-sector organisations, statutory agencies or others. More can be done.

For me, the bigger and perhaps better and more significant intervention would be to build a new type of society where, rather than tackling just the symptoms, we tackle the causes; a society where it is easier to talk about mental health; a society in which we are more respectful of each other; and a society that values each individual without discrimination or conditionality. I say to Members that the responsibility for starting that work and building that society rests primarily with us as civic leaders. As regards having a more respectful society, you have only to look at social media and the cesspit that it is for lack of respect. It rests on us to show some leadership and ensure that we do not denigrate ourselves by engaging with it and that we challenge it where it occurs. If we are to build a society that values each individual, we must be conscious of the impact of the words and language that we use.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that, for the respectful society that he mentioned, education is key and we need mandatory and comprehensive relationships and sexuality education (RSE) that reflects the lives of everybody here? Does he also agree that it is a disgrace that Departments with responsibility for equality have provided no funding to LGBT groups since Peter Hain was Secretary of State?

**Mr Muir:** I agree. In 2021, we should not have to debate those issues.

On the impact of our language, I fully get the right to freedom of speech, but with rights come responsibilities. Given that there has been a changing of the guard in political leadership in the country, particularly in the largest party, I ask those individuals to reflect on their words and language and the impact that they can have. I can remember the impact of that language as a young person growing up. That language was crushing. That language told me that I should either deny who I was or leave the country. Do you know something? I did leave, but I came back six months later determined to change this place. Every Member, whether as an MLA, a leader or a Minister, should take learning from what doctors sign up and agree

to on taking up their profession, which is to do no harm. That is our responsibility.

**Mr Butler:** I am one of those who was not going to speak in the debate, but I just want to commend each Member for how they have conducted the discussion. Mental ill health is one of the biggest crises that we face in Northern Ireland. That was the case pre COVID, and, obviously, it will only be exacerbated now. I know that the Minister is already setting out plans to tackle it. The Minister is the right person in the right place at the right time. I think, genuinely, that his performance over the last year will give comfort to people, as they will know that it is a priority of his.

I will pick up on a number of the issues that have been talked about. Mr Muir talked about the LGBT community here, which, for many years, has been marginalised, on the wrong end of conversations and bullied. He gave some stats. I have seen it over the years, and I regret those stats very much, I really do. It is almost unforgivable that those things are still the case in 2021. As a person of faith, I also suffered abuse and bullying in school. I was physically abused and spat on, so I know what it feels like to be marginalised. Woe betide anybody with a faith who uses their faith to marginalise someone else. I find that reprehensible and would pull anybody up who did it. We are all the same, and we are all different. It is our differences that need to be celebrated, and we all need to be given the room to be who we are.

Domestic abuse and coercive abuse were talked about. I was at an event at Queen's last week where I put on VR goggles and was able to view coercive abuse through the eyes of the victim. If you get a chance, guys, have a go at it, because it is quite revealing. Mr Buckley told a very emotional story about a family in Portadown who lost their son. The Minister was close to tears when he intervened to find an extra minute for the Member. These are all real issues and real problems.

I commend the motion and support it. However, it brings me back to one thing, guys: prevention. The motion is about intervention and the need to support people who are in need at the moment. That is absolutely right. We need to find the money, and, hopefully, we can do that through the Minister of Finance. Working collaboratively with structures such as the Department of Education, which was mentioned in the context of what we can do for young people, we can do this together. However, we also need to reach further and ask, "How do we prevent this problem continuing into the future? Is this the legacy that we want for our young people in 10, 15 or 20 years' time?". I go back to what I said in opening my speech: I commend each and every Member who has spoken on the motion. The tone has been brilliant — it has been excellent — and will give people hope that we are serious and collegiate about one of the most significant issues that we face in Northern Ireland.

I urge everyone, when we look at this, not to discount our ability to prevent such things happening. I will use an example that relates to addictions. Dr Gabor Maté's helix of the addiction cycle is simple to understand. He talks about trauma — Professor Siobhán O'Neill, our mental health champion, is big on trauma-informed practice — and how a lot of our problems, whether of addiction or mental health, come from a trauma. He describes how, for most people, addiction happens when there is a trauma. You

look for the fix. You take the fix that eases the pain, but the problem does not go away. You wake up with a hangover, reach for the drink or the drugs, and you go back in. Your problem is not fixed, so you just repeat the cycle. If we are to be serious about prevention, that is where we need to get to. We can use that image when we look at a lot of things, which may include relationships, coercive control, domestic abuse or bullying of the LGBT community and faith groups. We can apply it to everything.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be questions to the Minister of Health. This debate will resume immediately after Question Time, when the first Member to speak will be Rachel Woods.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.*

*On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair) —*

**2.00 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Health

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I advise the House that question 9 in the name of Ms Cara Hunter and topical question 3 in the name of Mr Gary Middleton have been withdrawn.

### Regional Dementia Care Pathway

1. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the implementation of the regional dementia care pathway, launched in March 2018. (AQO 2061/17-22)

**Mr McCrossan:** I put on record my sincerest appreciation of and thanks to all carers for those with Alzheimer's disease or dementia across Northern Ireland. They are doing great work in supporting the vulnerable people in our society who are battling this awful illness.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I thank the Member. To date, work has been carried out that has already made significant improvements to the lives and well-being of people with dementia and their carers. It is vital that we continue to push forward with that work. In 2019, regional dementia leads, integrated care partnerships and the trusts established multi-agency working groups to consider what arrangements, structures and resources were required to support the roll-out of the regional dementia care pathway.

Legacy funding from the Delivering Social Change dementia signature programme supported the recruitment of two dementia service improvement leads in each trust, with specific responsibility for coordinating the pathway implementation programme in their respective trusts. The regional dementia lead and commissioning staff at the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) have drawn up a detailed commissioning specification and invited the local implementation groups to submit investment proposal templates to support the implementation of a prototype in each area. That is to be completed and returned to the Health and Social Care Board by 30 June this year. It has been agreed that the implementation structures will include a regional steering group that will have oversight of implementation across all five trust areas in order to ensure consistency and shared learning, a regional stakeholder reference group and local multi-agency and disciplinary implementation groups that will include people with dementia and carers. The expectation is that a pathway will be rolled out across all areas in a three-year time frame, subject to the availability of any funding necessary. As Members know, we face and are likely to continue to face an extremely challenging fiscal environment.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Before I call Mr McCrossan for his supplementary question, some Members have advised me that they are struggling to hear you, Minister. Can you move your microphone closer?

**Mr McCrossan:** Thank you for that answer, Minister. Those living with dementia have been worst hit by the pandemic, with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's (NISRA) published statistics indicating that dementia and Alzheimer's disease were the most common pre-existing conditions appearing in one third of all COVID-19-related deaths in Northern Ireland. Given that this is Dementia Action Week, can the Minister outline what steps his Department is taking to ensure that the views of those living with dementia are heard as we build back a better health service?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member. I refer him to some of the content in my previous answer about the regional dementia leads and the commissioning specification that has been drawn up by the Health and Social Care Board. The implementation groups have been asked to submit investment proposal templates to support the implementation of a prototype. That bidding and implementation process is due to end by 30 June this year.

In relation to the reform of dementia services, my Department has previously provided funding to support the roll-out of actions from the Delivering Social Change dementia signature programme. That included the appointment of 10 dementia service improvement leads, 10 dementia navigators and 44 dementia champions. Additional work is ongoing to support the roll-out of products and findings from phase 2 of the Delivering Social Change programme, which includes and takes account of input from users and dementia sufferers through a co-production approach.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The Minister mentioned the reform of dementia care services, which is crucial, and all the actions outlined in that.

What support will families and, in particular, carers get? When does the Minister intend to publish his strategy on the reform of adult social care services?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for that important question on the support that carers need. They have had a particularly hard time over the past 14 months. The social care recommendations are being worked through by the Department. We have looked at them, especially for care homes, to see how we can support people with a dementia through the care partner programme so that we can ensure that a family member or another familiar face can go into their care home and give them that support while they are there. That work is ongoing. As I say, the vital piece for us is that it is co-produced, because one thing that we must take out of the past 14 months is to learn from the lived experience of people who suffer from dementia and their carers.

## Domiciliary Care Packages

2. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the current delivery of domiciliary care packages. (AQO 2062/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. Domiciliary care is an essential front-line community care service that has been sustained throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Statutory and independent-sector domiciliary care providers have liaised closely during the pandemic to maintain service provision. The pandemic has presented challenges for the sector, such as the suspension of some

domiciliary care packages at various stages. That was done at the request of service users or families to reduce the risk of contact and transmission of the virus. Some domiciliary care providers have experienced COVID-19-related staff shortages that led to changes in service provision. Trusts have worked to address those shortages by, for example, reconfiguring service provision across geographical areas.

Now and throughout the pandemic, health and social care trusts and providers have endeavoured to ensure that any fully or partially outstanding domiciliary care packages are still provided. As of 26 April this year, there were 23,188 domiciliary care packages being provided in the community. I am pleased to note that, over the past 12 months, the social care workforce has expended significantly, with an increase of 2,086 registered workers between May 2020 and April 2021. While that is welcome, more staff are clearly still needed to ensure that services continue to be delivered as and when they are required.

Trusts aim to achieve timely discharge in every case. Sometimes, however, there are delays in getting people home. In some cases, that can be a result of delays in getting the right care package in place. There are also occasions on which individuals are returned home into their family's care until a package can be implemented. While delays in implementation can be frustrating for all concerned, it is vital that patient safety and well-being remains at the forefront of decision-making in hospitals.

Some £275 million was invested in domiciliary care in the financial year 2018-19. The Department remains committed to providing a high-quality domiciliary care service —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** If the —.

**Mr Swann:** — to support people to remain in their home.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I was about to ask you, Minister, whether you wanted to conclude, because Mr Buchanan has a supplementary question. You were able to get to the end of the text anyway.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. COVID has put a strain on care packages that people had prior to the pandemic. I am aware, as, no doubt, are other Members, that there are still issues in other areas, not just Mid Ulster. What is the financial situation with regard to addressing bed-blocking? Are additional resources available? I appreciate that you said that you have additional resources. Bed-blocking is still going on, however. People are not getting out in a timely manner, and that puts pressure on families and hospitals. Can the Minister put any more resources into dealing with it in order to prevent it totally?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for that point. It is about patient flow and flow management. As constituency MLAs, we all know of the challenges. When the appropriate care package is not available, some family members want their loved one to remain in the hospital setting until it is provided. I understand that there are several hundred fully or partially outstanding domiciliary care packages across Northern Ireland. While that is not the situation that I want to see, trusts have mitigation measures in place to ensure that care is still provided to those individuals. To ensure the continuation of care, the trust sends a list of outstanding cases to its in-house domiciliary care service and all the

independent-sector providers each day, requesting their assistance with accepting those care packages either in full or in part. Every evening, that outstanding list is shared with the commissioning teams and key workers for review and validation. That is an ongoing process of review of people who are still in hospital but need a support package.

I urge that it is not that they are viewed as bed-blockers; it is basically just until we get appropriate care and support mechanisms in place to ensure that they are going home to a safe environment. It is vital that we get that flow right, throughout our entire health service, so that we can get as many people as possible seen in a hospital setting.

**Mrs Barton:** I, too, would like to put on record my thanks to the domiciliary care staff and givers. They have provided a great service to those who needed them, particularly during COVID, and when many people needed to be looked after in their home.

In Fermanagh and South Tyrone, we have a number of problems around domiciliary care packages. Domiciliary care packages are recommended, but we have difficulty with getting individuals to take up positions in the domiciliary care career pathway. Minister, what steps will you take to try to recruit new members?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for her point. She will know from my original answer that I welcomed the fact that, between May last year and April this year, we have an additional 2,000 people working in that highly valued profession. It is about giving them the support and recognition to do their jobs. It is also about it being a career for those who want a career in the service.

I recently established the social care fair work forum, which will bring about representations from the health trade unions, the workers, the service providers and the trusts, so that we can identify how to progress those who want to work in social care and make it a job of choice for many. However, the Member rightly indicated that, in some areas across Northern Ireland, there is a geographical challenge in regard to recruitment. That also has to be tackled and addressed through that piece of work. It is about a whole-system approach because no part of the health service works independently of any other part.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Before I call the next Member to ask a question, I remind Members to ask short, sharp questions. I am as given to windiness as the rest of us, but it is really important. To give us a perfect example of a short, sharp, focused question, I call Ms Emma Sheerin.

**Ms Sheerin:** Minister, you will remember that, in November 2020, I asked if your Department kept a record of the number of people who sadly passed away whilst on the waiting list for a domiciliary care package. I am thinking particularly of the emotional stress that that causes for families, particularly when loved ones have a family member who is in a palliative care situation or is unwell, and they are going into the house with a responsibility as opposed to spending precious time with the member of their family. In November, you committed to looking at that. Do you have an update on that?

**Mr Swann:** I do not have an answer with me today, but I will get back to the Member in writing.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Colin McGrath.

**Mr McGrath:** Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am sorry to hear about your windiness.

Will the Minister give me his assessment on carers' pay? Does he agree with me that the work that they have done during COVID-19 has just proved to us the absolute need to have fully resourced and well-paid staff in our domiciliary team?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for that. If the Principal Deputy Speaker wants medical help, I am sure that we can point him in the right direction.

The expert panel report, 'Power to People', which was published by my Department in 2017, proposed that the care and support sector should be at least a living-wage sector as a first step to recognising it as a professional workforce.

On 13 May 2020, I announced that I intended to make much-needed improvements in standardisation with regard to pay, training and career pathways for the social care workforce. My officials are working to develop policy proposals in respect of providing a pay uplift, which will be part of a package of measures to improve opportunities for the social care workforce in line with the wider aims of the Department of Health's work to reform adult social care and its future sustainability for Northern Ireland.

As I said earlier, in addition to addressing low pay, further measures have been delivered to improve the training, education and career development opportunities available to the workforce, and I have invested funding to develop a social care workforce strategy for Northern Ireland. That strategy will signal the commitment of my Department to the strategic value of the social care workforce in the health and social care service in Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

## Health Inequalities

3. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health for an update on measures he is taking to reduce health inequalities. (AQO 2063/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. The latest health inequalities annual report, which was published by my Department on 14 April, highlighted that inequalities in health outcomes continue to be a key challenge. The report showed that alcohol- and drug-related indicators continue to show some of the largest health inequalities that are monitored in Northern Ireland, with rates in the most deprived areas being five times those in the least deprived areas for drug-related mortality and four times for alcohol-specific mortality. Other large inequalities exist for teenage birth rates, smoking in pregnancy and healthy life expectancy.

Inequalities in health outcomes primarily arise because of the inequalities in the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. Those conditions influence the ability of individuals, families and communities to take control of their own lives and choices and whether they are enabled and supported to lead long, healthy, active lives.

My Department leads on Making Life Better, 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. The pandemic has, no doubt, exacerbated existing inequalities. Therefore, my Department and the Public Health Agency (PHA) continue 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. The Public Health Agency has also developed a short-, medium- and long-term plan for the recovery of health improvement services, the majority of which are focused on the most deprived communities.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Figures that we discussed recently in the Health Committee show that men in deprived areas die seven years younger than those in more affluent areas. The figure was five years for women. Those figures are really shocking. Belfast has 32 areas, and Derry and Strabane have 25, in which they perform below the average for health outcomes. Does the Minister agree that poverty is the main driver of those inequalities and that, in order to tackle health inequalities, we need urgent action on the eradication of poverty?

**Mr Swann:** I fully agree with the Member. He knows that I addressed the issue at the Health Committee on Thursday. When we talk about health inequalities, that is the measure at the end. We, as an Executive, a community and an Assembly, need to invest at the start so that we support the community and the individual throughout their life. As I said, those inequalities are subject to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. If we, as an Executive, can improve people's lived experience through their housing conditions, education, opportunity to work and opportunity to have a better life balance, we can really challenge those health inequalities. That is something that is, and should be, at the core of our Programme for Government.

**Mr Gildernew:** Minister, there has been no progress on oral health outcomes. We have some of the worst in these islands. Given the profound health inequalities that exist and the underspends in the Department, will you commit to allocating resources to address that inequality?

**Mr Swann:** The current Northern Ireland oral health strategy was published back in 2007. Despite its age, the main oral health problems that are described in the document and the approaches to prevention that are advocated by it remain largely valid today. Although it is still valid, it is accepted that, in some instances, the settings or opportunities for prevention have changed. As such, prior to COVID-19, my Department decided that the two sections of the Northern Ireland population that would benefit most from updated oral disease prevention programmes were young people and older adults.

An older adults health options group has been established and is chaired by the acting Chief Dental Officer. The oral health strategy for older adults is expected to be published later this year. The young people's oral health options group has, unfortunately, been delayed until later this year, although some preparatory work has commenced. The intention is for the groups to establish the oral health needs of children and older adults in Northern Ireland and review the evidence base to determine which preventative interventions are likely to be the most effective and cost-effective.

**Mr Dickson:** Minister, one of the other health inequalities is the outcomes for screening. Screening is so important for a wide range of illnesses and diseases, yet the communities that you made reference to are the ones where there is the least amount of screening take-up. What is your Department doing to encourage take-up of screening services?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for that. He is right, and that is the challenge that continually faces not just my Department but the PHA and GPs that we work with in collaboration as well. It is about making screening accessible to people in their own environments.

The Member will be aware of the Big Bus that goes round for the cancer screening services. It is about bringing that service as close to people as possible but also making them aware of the preventative benefits of screening. That is what this is about, and what the discussion in regard to health inequalities should be about. It is about prevention being better than cure or treatment, so the more people we can screen, the better. It is about education and awareness but also accessibility.

**Mr McNulty:** Minister, this day three weeks ago, my son, Setanta, was born in Daisy Hill Hospital. My wife and I were overwhelmed by the quality of care received from the maternity teams, GPs, doctors, nurses, midwives, community midwives, porters, cleaning and catering staff. It was second to none. It was world class. It was exemplary. Minister, we do not know how to thank them.

Minister, in relation to the question at hand, with the recently published health inequalities report showing that the rates of alcohol-specific mortality in the most deprived areas are four times that in the least deprived, what steps is your Department taking to tackle the problem with alcohol?

**Mr Swann:** I congratulate the Member and his wife on the birth of their child. I know that in a conversation earlier, there was an allegation made by the Chair of the Health Committee that the Member was interested in going to discos. Speaking from experience from a number of years ago, as a new father, that will be the last thing on the Member's mind.

With regard to his question, the substance use strategy that is being worked through by my Department acknowledges that alcohol is still the drug of choice in Northern Ireland. The question is how we meet that strong challenge. The Member may or may not be aware that we are looking at a minimum unit pricing strategy for Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, it is not as far advanced as we would like, but that is due to go out to consultation towards the end of this year, so that preparatory work will have been started for whoever takes up this post after the next election.

## Long COVID

4. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the development of services for patients suffering from long COVID. (AQO 2064/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. The Health and Social Care Board recently submitted proposals to my Department, and I have asked that they be considered urgently. I hope to announce a decision shortly.

In developing the proposals, the Health and Social Care Board has been engaging extensively with the primary and secondary care sectors as well as other stakeholder groups to ensure that we have the right service offering to meet the needs of people in Northern Ireland. Once a final service model has been approved, work will be undertaken to rapidly deliver the appropriate services.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Minister for his response. Recent correspondence that I got from the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy stated that one in 10 of those testing positive for COVID-19 had symptoms for 12 weeks or longer. They estimate that there could be a need for 41 extra physiotherapy posts to address the community rehabilitation needs of COVID survivors here in the North.

As the Minister pointed out, the needs of long COVID patients will include physiotherapy but go beyond that. What level of funding and resources will the Minister allocate to develop services for patients who are suffering from long COVID?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. With regard to who will make up those teams, we are looking at that multidisciplinary approach as well, so there will be physiotherapists, primary care and secondary care.

The costing proposals that have come forward to me to establish that service are not insignificant. This year and next year, we are looking at something in the region of £2 million to supply that service. It is not simply a question of how much money I will allocate; it is how much his party colleague in the Ministry of Finance will see this as a worthy cause to support in additional item bids or monitoring rounds from COVID moneys. It has been debated in the House that this is a service that is needed.

**Mr Storey:** Keeping things in North Antrim, it is good to see that the five-party mandatory coalition is working well when the Minister is making a bid already for additional finances. What planning is going into making up those multidisciplinary teams? Long COVID will be with us, if you will excuse the pun, for a long time. Will you ensure, Minister, that facilities such as Dalriada Hospital in Ballycastle, Robinson Hospital in Ballymoney and our local health centres will play an important role in those teams, given their strategic location and importance?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for the local question. Who knows? Maybe when the bid comes to the Executive, he may be able to support or approve it, depending on what role he finds himself in, if any. *[Laughter.]* I assure the Member that the full services and where we base long COVID supports will be part of the commissioning model in order to make sure that we get the best supply and locations across Northern Ireland. I will not make any commitments at this time, but it is vital that those services are established and funded.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I welcome today's update on the long COVID service. However, you will know, Minister, that I remain very concerned that we still do not have a fully commissioned service for another post-viral condition, ME, despite there being 7,000 people with the condition across Northern Ireland. Will you give us an update on that service?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member. I do not have an update on ME services with me. However, she has long called for the establishment of the long COVID support model,

and I thank her for her consistency in and persistence on that. Once again, when it comes to supporting the bid for additional funding through the Executive, I hope that she can apply the same pressure on her ministerial colleague as well. I will get back to the Member in writing with an update on recruitment for the ME service.

**Mr Chambers:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Those who suffer from long COVID will welcome the announcement that the board has completed its important piece of work. It is, obviously, very easy to draw comparisons with what England is doing on long COVID. Will he confirm, however, that neither Scotland nor Wales are planning on following the English approach and that they, too, are focusing much more on a multidisciplinary approach?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member. Some of the challenge has come from the perception of what the Department has been doing. In October, NHS England announced that it was supplying £10 million to be invested in the establishment of a number of multidisciplinary clinics, which would improve multidisciplinary teams in the same way that we are looking at a multidisciplinary approach. I understand that neither Scotland nor Wales are planning to follow England's approach on the establishment of the specialist assessment clinics. In Scotland, the focus to date has been on developing community-based services and on mental health needs. Wales has identified a need for a multidisciplinary rehabilitation service, with a care pathway being developed for post-COVID-19 syndrome, as well as a recovery map.

## Ambulance Replacement

5. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Health to outline what impact the COVID-19 pandemic will have on replacing ambulances. (AQO 2065/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member. The pandemic has caused manufacturers in the automotive industry to close factories for short periods. That has created supply chain delays and has, ultimately, reduced the availability of new vehicles, which has caused the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) to experience delays in replacing ambulances. However, my Department continues to provide capital funding for the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service fleet replacement programme, and, in January 2021, following a short delay due to the pandemic, the Department approved the fleet replacement business case for the period 2021 to 2025-26.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he assure the public that regular funding for replacement ambulances will continue, given the fact that they are a vital front-line asset for patients of all ages? Will he also take into account the fact that ambulance staff must have top-quality life-saving equipment on board?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member. To give the Member and the House an update, I will say that our Ambulance Service has a fleet of 330 emergency and non-emergency vehicles, including A&E ambulances, patient-care service vehicles, the Northern Ireland Specialist Transport and Retrieval (NISTAR) vehicles, rapid response vehicles (RRVs) and support vehicles.

There are currently 116 A&E ambulances, 112 patient care service vehicles and 43 rapid-response vehicles. The

vehicles are replaced under a five-year rolling programme. In January 2021, the Department approved a business case for £22.7 million for the replacement of vehicles until the end of 2025-26. That programme allows for a proportion of the fleet to be replaced annually, which spreads the need for capital funding evenly over the period of replacement and allows it to be planned and managed effectively, thus minimising the risk to service operations.

### 2.30 pm

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Minister. That concludes the period for tabled questions to the Minister. We move on to topical questions.

### Lateral Flow Tests

T1. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Health, given that information on nidirect states that, from 24 May, anyone who travels within the common travel area (CTA) does not have to isolate but must, in line with public health advice, take a pre-departure lateral flow test, to be repeated on day 2 and day 8 post-arrival in Northern Ireland, to confirm that that is a legal requirement. (AQT 1321/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I confirm to the Member that the information is in guidance at this time, because that is how we as an Executive have managed travel within the common travel area.

**Mr Catney:** Minister, should we not put all guidance into law to provide clarity to the public, particularly as lockdown eases?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. In the past 14 months, the Executive have supported travel within the common travel area under guidance rather than regulation, because, if we put it into law, it will need enforcement. If we were to put in place regulations on travel east-west, we would have to take into consideration travel North/South and how that would be policed and enforced. The Executive have taken the decision that the rules on travel within the common travel area should be based in guidance. The guidance is there for a reason: it is not only to support the people of Northern Ireland but to maintain and provide advice to those who wish to travel from other areas to Northern Ireland on how they can best look after themselves and the loved ones whom they are coming to visit or stay with, or the work colleagues with whom they will be socialising now that some easements have been made.

### Orthopaedic Surgery: Waiting Times

T2. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health to outline the work that his Department is doing with the health and social care trusts in an effort to reduce waiting times for orthopaedic surgery. (AQT 1322/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. He will know that we have established a board for rebuilding services to look at how we get back to completing the number of surgeries that we were completing in the past.

On orthopaedic surgeries, while we look at a specific hub-and-spoke model that we had developed and build up local capacity, we are using the private sector. Recently, we utilised orthopaedic operations in the Republic of Ireland. We were able to buy some provision of operations there while we get our health service back to full capacity.

**Mr T Buchanan:** Thank you, Minister, for your response. The reason why I asked the question is that a constituent waited three and a half years to see a consultant. He saw the consultant about a month ago, and the consultant confirmed that he needed two hip replacements. However, he was then told that he would have to go on another waiting list for up to 240 weeks, which is four years and eight months. If that is the case, he will have been on a waiting list for a total of eight years and four months. Minister, you will agree that that is totally unacceptable. Can you give us any indication of when orthopaedic surgery will be back in full swing, if you like, in, for example, the Western Health and Social Care Trust?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member. He asked for my opinion about that waiting list: of course it is not acceptable. Since I have come into post, I have been clear that those waiting lists are not acceptable. We must do everything that we can to get in front of them, not just get back to where we were. When we look at where we were pre COVID, we see that those waiting lists were increasing, even without the challenges that COVID has presented. It is about how we look at our rebuilding board, and I know that the Member specifically mentioned the Western Trust. We have been looking at that regional approach so that we take people from the top of the waiting list or with key priorities and offer them the operation or the service no matter where that theatre capacity may be so that we can get a standardisation, I suppose, across Northern Ireland so that those who are waiting longest do not have to wait on their local trust's waiting list but we can see how we can respond as a service to get those waiting lists down.

### E-cigarettes

T4. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health, given that the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 received Royal Assent in May 2016, giving the Department of Health powers, which it has not used, to prohibit the sale of nicotine products, including e-cigarettes, to under-18s, meaning five years when children have been able to purchase e-cigarettes, albeit the past year has been a challenge, to state what his Department did over the previous five years to bring the regulations into law. (AQT 1324/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for her question. I can answer with regard to what has happened since January 2020. As the Member knows, within a number of weeks of coming into office, we were faced with a pandemic, so many pieces of work that were already in train in the Department were put on hold. I think that this was one of them, and I will check that and get back to the Member in detail in writing. I do not have the specific list in front of me, but I will respond to her.

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Minister for his attention. He will know that this has a significant impact for the rest of people's lives. Will he commit to introducing the regulations before the end of the mandate?

**Mr Swann:** As I said, I will check with my Department on how far that work has been progressed. Again, I will respond to the Member in writing with an update as soon as I have it.

## EU Medicines Regulations

T5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health to confirm that requirements in the protocol to follow EU medicines regulations add to bureaucracy and are likely to add to the costs and lack of availability of some medicines, thus adversely affecting the entire community, given that, during yesterday's debate on unfettered access to medicines, it was striking that some of the commentary remained stuck in the 2016 Brexit debate rather than focusing on how we can work collectively to avoid the adverse effects on our health service. (AQT 1325/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member. As we debated yesterday, medicines and medical devices supplied through the NHS bring cost advantages to the Northern Ireland health service, and their distribution through our controlled free NHS and GP prescriptions cannot threaten the EU single market. Given that everyone in Northern Ireland will be adversely affected by increased pharmacy costs, there has to be a realisation about the implication of what that means for additional bureaucracy, the time frames and the supply chains that have to be put in place for the delivery of those medicines.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Minister confirm that the additional bureaucracy and unnecessary costs will be a burden on his budget and ultimately mean that less money can be spent on our waiting lists and the other pressing issues that we face?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. As was debated yesterday afternoon about how we now have to look to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) regarding where medicines are licensed and their uses, it puts an additional strain on the small team that works with my Chief Pharmaceutical Officer on how we assess what medicines are available and on the additional bureaucracy and management that is now needed because we are in two jurisdictions. While the grace period is useful, it is coming to an end, which puts an additional workload on how we seek to ensure that those medicine supplies and medical devices are there for the long term and not just through the grace period.

## Abortion Services: WHSCT

T6. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health what action he has taken to provide early medical abortion services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT) area. (AQT 1326/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The Member's question has been covered in the Chamber a number of times. My Department is not required under the law to commission abortion services. In recognition and anticipation of regulations being introduced by the UK Government from March last year, however, my Department had commenced work to develop a commissioning model and service specification for those services to be delivered in Northern Ireland. That work was paused from February 2020, owing to the need to divert departmental and Health and Social Care (HSC) staff resources to manage the response to the pandemic. The Western Health and Social Care Trust has been delivering a service, and, as far as I am aware, it is looking to recruit to fill the post that is vacant at the minute.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Women in my constituency in Derry have a right to a full suite of medical abortion and crisis pregnancy services. Minister, you need to ensure that the trust meets its legal responsibilities and commissions the services that are required. Do you agree that it is fundamentally wrong and in contravention of equality and human rights to expect women from Derry to travel outside the jurisdiction, particularly during a pandemic, to access routine healthcare that is afforded to women in every other part of the UK?

**Mr Swann:** The Executive have yet to come to an agreement on the provision of early medical abortion in Northern Ireland. Women who require access to services not available in their own trust area can contact the British Pregnancy Advisory Service for access to services. They may also contact their GP.

## Northern Ireland Hospice: Support

T7. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Health what support he has provided to the Northern Ireland Hospice this year and whether that support will be ongoing as the years progress, given that he will know that, although the hospice is based in north Belfast, it provides a regional service. (AQT 1327/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member and acknowledge the work that the Northern Ireland Hospice provides as a regional service. The Member will be aware that not just my Department but the Department of Finance made a number of financial interventions during the past year in support of the hospice. He will also be aware, because I have said it numerous times, that I am constrained by a one-year budget with non-recurrent funding proposals. As we go forward, I must look at what commitments are in place in New Decade, New Approach to support palliative care. It is a whole-Executive approach, and we need a commitment to a recurrent Budget that can allow us to make long-term commitments.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for his answer and encourage him to fight for resources for the hospice.

You will be aware that, during the COVID pandemic, the Mater Hospital has played a key and pivotal role as a COVID hospital. I ask the Minister whether he values the role that the Mater Hospital plays in greater Belfast in providing medical care. Can he assure us that, going forward, the Mater Hospital's services will be protected?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. The Mater has played a vital and crucial role in our fight against COVID. It also plays a vital and crucial role in our recovery process. I raised that issue in discussion with the chair of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust when we last met. I stressed to him the value that we place on the Mater Hospital as part of our footprint and as part of our entire health estate. We need every square foot of it. Service provision may not be the same as it was pre COVID, but I assure the Member that it is a vital part of and link in our health service in Northern Ireland.

## Oxygen Generators: India

T8. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the oxygen generators that were shipped to India and to state what purpose they are serving and whether they are operational. (AQT 1328/17-22)



**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. That is a fantastic example of what we in the health service of Northern Ireland can do. It has not been acknowledged greatly that the three generators that we were able to ship were manufactured in Northern Ireland with support with engineering from the Belfast Trust.

Those three generators have arrived in India: two of them have already been connected to hospital supplies, and the third one is undergoing commissioning work. We expect to receive an update in the next few days on the full operation of those three generators and the vital part that they are playing in helping India to combat COVID-19 by supporting patients with a supply of oxygen that has been engineered, developed, designed and built here in Northern Ireland.

**2.45 pm**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am sorry, but we have run out of time for a supplementary; you can get him later. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before we move back to the motion on Mental Health Awareness Week.

## Committee Business

### Mental Health Awareness Week

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly notes that the week commencing 10 May was Mental Health Awareness Week, which annually provides the opportunity to highlight the importance of mental health; further notes the 2021 health inequalities report, which identified continuing mental health inequalities; recognises the detrimental impact that COVID-19 has had on the mental health and well-being of the population, including our children and young people; further recognises the positive public health campaigns around mental health, such as Take 5; advocates that people seek support to talk about their mental health; and supports the Minister of Health to achieve parity of esteem between mental and physical health by increasing spending on mental health services, fully implementing the Protect Life 2 strategy and progressing the 10-year mental health and substance use strategies. — [Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health).]*

**Miss Woods:** I thank the members of the Health Committee for tabling the motion. It is really important that we send a message to people in Northern Ireland that mental health is taken seriously and that help is out there. It is really important for people to talk and reach out to each other to seek help, even if it is initially to a friend or family member, and to take advantage of the support that is there. It is also crucial that the Executive deal with the ongoing and historical issues with accessing mental health services and dealing with the root causes.

The COVID crisis will have and already has had psychosocial impacts on people here that will be felt for years to come, and short-term changes will be difficult for our mental health. That is something that I have found difficult recently, especially as we emerge from another lockdown. We also have much to do to deal with historical trauma and the intergenerational impacts of the conflict.

The health inequalities report 2021 that is referenced in the motion highlights massive gaps that continue to exist in mental health provision between those who are disadvantaged and those who are better off. The death rate from intentional self-harm in the most deprived areas was double that in the least deprived areas, and prescription rates for mental health problems are increasing and the gap between the most and least deprived areas widening. Those are shocking statistics, and they highlight the urgent need for improvement.

Like others, I want to focus on children and young people and how they, in particular, are still waiting for the services that they need. Last year, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum surveyed thousands of children and young people on the issues affecting them. In response to its April survey, 62% said that mental health was the main issue that they, as a young person, faced; 332 young people mentioned loneliness and isolation; and 361 said that fear and uncertainty were affecting them, which, as we all know, impacts on mental health. In its November survey, 74% of the nearly 4,000 young people who were surveyed said that they felt that their mental health had deteriorated during the pandemic. Mental health and well-being were the joint-top issues for young people at the time

of the survey — 67% mentioned them — with isolation, loneliness and boredom following suit.

Only 29% of the respondents said that they felt hopeful about the future, and over half felt that they are not coping well with not seeing friends and family. That is not OK. It is not OK that our children and young people continue to raise that, especially when we know that youth mental health services are unable to meet demand.

The Children's Commissioner has been clear on the need for a children's rights-compliant mental health system that is responsive to children and young people. 'The Elephant in the Room' report, published in July 2016, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recommend that the Executive:

*“Rigorously invest in child and adolescent mental health services and develop strategies at national and devolved levels, with clear time frames, targets, measurable indicators, effective monitoring mechanisms and sufficient human, technical and financial resources.”*

Nearly five years on, I reiterate that call.

As we come out of the COVID crisis, trying to get back to the way things were is not good enough. We must build back better and focus on resilience and well-being to ensure that those needs are met. We need properly resourced services for the people who need them, no more cuts to the very organisations that exist to help others and support for people of all ages. We also need to reconsider what we prioritise and value as a society. The community and voluntary sector has a wealth of experience and can help to meet the challenges that we face. The sector has been going above and beyond, providing support to some of the most vulnerable in society, including our children and young people, and it has picked up where statutory organisations cannot. That is set against a backdrop of already stretched resources and the added pressures of a dramatic fall in fundraised income and increased demand. For this work, we must be forever grateful.

Are we going to continue to prioritise macroeconomics like gross value added (GVA) and GDP as the marker of progress, or can we do better and prioritise health and well-being as the key to a just and green recovery for our generation and the generations to come?

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Chair and Committee colleagues for bringing this important motion to the Floor today. Obviously, last week was Mental Health Awareness Week, and this is a very important and timely debate for everyone who had mental health problems, illnesses, stress, anxiety and depression before the pandemic and those who will or may experience those issues at a greater level or for the first time after the pandemic.

The fact is that people's lives and, in many ways, the world was turned upside down by the pandemic. It would not be surprising if there was an increase in mental health issues as a result of the necessary measures that were put in place to protect people because of COVID. The motion correctly notes that people who are facing difficulties should reach out and seek help, and that is, of course, safe and sound advice. My main concern is that people I know, people in my constituency and many others across the North, have reached out and taken that important step

and, instead of getting immediate and urgent access to services, many of them, some of whom have presented at A&E, have been sent home and put on a waiting list for weeks to get the appropriate help. That is very worrying.

The CAMHS figures that the Chair quoted earlier are also very concerning and worrying for the people who need help. My main concern is that the Minister is essentially presiding over an underfunded and broken system. I do not doubt his personal commitment to the issue of mental health — I have said that before — but I remain unconvinced that there is a plan beyond the mental health strategy to increase the number of counsellors, psychiatric nurses and psychologists to the level that we need to see. After the Minister's comments at last week's Health Committee, I remain unconvinced that there is a plan in place with the current budget.

**Ms Dillon:** I thank the Member for taking an intervention. I am sure the Member will agree that there is a real issue with proper supervision for people when they are first administered with medication. It is supposed to happen for a minimum of six weeks, and it is not happening in the manner that it should.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Member for her intervention. I agree with the Member. Obviously, self-medication is a further problem on top of that.

Coming out of the pandemic, despite words to the contrary, there has been an acceptance that what went before can and must continue going forward. We have to reject that narrative outright.

Globally, the wealthy have increased their lot from \$5 trillion to \$13 trillion. That is the greatest swindle of our time, and it took place when we were trying to manage and fight the pandemic. One Member said that poor mental health can affect anybody: of course, that is true, but it is not the full picture, as the discussion has touched on. If you are in a working-class or deprived community, you are more likely to have health problems, as we heard at Question Time. You are more likely to have mental health issues, life obstacles and so on. The #123GP campaign pointed out that 50% of GP services in my constituency and, I think, in others in the North are without access to in-house counselling. That is scandalous, when other constituencies have 100% access. Why does that discrepancy exist? It needs to be tackled and addressed. Class is one of the main determinants of whether people will be ill and whether they can get access to services. People with a few thousand pounds in the bank can get access to cancer services and, possibly, other services, if they can fork out that money, but not everybody has access to such money, as the almost 400,000 people who are in poverty here can attest to.

We also need to call out the role of sectarianism and bigotry in our society and racism, homophobia and sexism in our communities, which Mr Muir touched on. Those issues need to be tackled generally and, specifically, the role that they play in making people's mental health worse. People leave these shores because of the poisonous atmosphere in society and the role played by some people in whipping that up. Those issues are part of mental health and tackling mental health problems.

I support the motion, obviously, and pay tribute to the many important groups in my constituency and beyond. There are too many to name, but Compass Counselling on

the Shankill is an important cross-community organisation that, unfortunately, has to fight for funding. I have already mentioned the #123GP campaign, and there is the Lenadoon counselling service. I am sure that I have left out many, but there are many good services in my constituency and beyond. I pay tribute to them and thank them for their work.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I start by thanking the Chair of the Health Committee for tabling the motion and the Members who have spoken so passionately in their support. In this debate, we have seen the best of the House: working together on a subject with a unity of purpose. Many times, when Committees bring motions to the House, it ends up with Committee members talking to themselves. However, this subject has brought in many other Members, with a diverse range of aspects and personal contributions that have shown the dedication of the House to truly tackling the challenge that is mental health. It has also highlighted the many aspects that make up the mental health challenge across Northern Ireland. When we talk about mental health in the generality, we can forget about some of the specifics that have been mentioned by Members today.

I am grateful to have the opportunity again to speak publicly about one of my top priorities and one of the most important aspects of my Department's remit: mental health. Last week, during Mental Health Awareness Week, mental health rightly featured heavily in the media. I am hopeful that we can continue to build on that platform to ensure that it continues to receive public and governmental focus. We have to keep the momentum going if we truly want to see lasting and meaningful change, but that focus and commitment need to be maintained for 52 weeks of the year, not simply for Mental Health Awareness Week.

As we have heard, the 'Health Inequalities Annual Report' that was published last month highlighted the continuing challenges in mental health. It is shocking but, unfortunately, unsurprising that those living in our most deprived areas experience poor mental health. While I am encouraged that there were some positive changes noted in the report, there is much more work to be done to improve that. It is not something that my Department alone can address. Inequalities in health outcomes arise primarily, as I said in Question Time, because of the inequality in the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. Those conditions, known as social determinants of health, influence the ability of our communities and the individuals in those communities to lead long, healthy and active lives.

### 3.00 pm

My Department leads on Making Life Better, which is the overarching strategic framework for public health. It outlines the Executive's commitment to creating the conditions for individuals, families and communities to take greater control over their lives and to be enabled and supported to improve their well-being and 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. It is important that we continue to work collaboratively on that, as no Department has the resources or the power to combat the issues alone.

There is no doubt that the pandemic has exacerbated health inequalities, and it has certainly impacted our community's mental health. As raised by quite a number of Members, children and young people have been disproportionately impacted. For many, the loss of the daily structure that school attendance normally provides, alongside reduced social contact and support in school, has had an impact on well-being and could lead to a deterioration in mental health. Early in the pandemic, I recognised that impact, and, as a result, in May 2020, my Department produced the mental health action plan, which included a COVID-19 mental health response plan. That set out a range of key actions that my Department and its agencies were taking forward to support our communities during the initial period of lockdown and beyond.

My Department has worked collaboratively with the health and social care sector, the community and voluntary sectors and other Departments to provide as much help and support to our population as possible. That includes free online stress control classes; a COVID-19 well-being hub; new use of technology; funding for children and young people for the Department of Education; and much more. Along with the health and social care sector, my Department has developed public messaging during the pandemic, and, as the Chair acknowledged, the Take 5 programme has been widely adopted by many agencies and communities. I am pleased to see that continue. For example, last month my Department launched the "How are you Feeling?" mental health campaign in over 500 community pharmacies in Northern Ireland. That was done in partnership with the Health and Social Care Board, the PHA and Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland. The campaign runs to the end of this month and encourages people to simply ask the question, "How are you feeling?".

Well-being campaigns are a hugely important tool in promoting positive messaging on mental health, reducing stigma and supporting people to look after their emotional well-being and mental health, as well as signposting people to further help and support if they need it. However, even as we start to move out of the restrictions that have been in place, the impact of the last year will affect for some time to come our communities, their mental health and the services that support them. It is, unfortunately, highly likely that we will see a surge in mental health needs over the coming months and years; indeed, we are already witnessing the beginnings of that in our mental health services. Our trusts are reporting an increase in referrals, as well as a heightened acuity of patients. Members will no doubt have heard the comments that I made to the Health Committee last week about bed pressures. Those include patients sleeping in chairs and the reality of being a patient in mental health crisis. It is a sad reflection of the priority that we have given to mental health over the last number of years that patients cannot count on having a bed to sleep in when they are admitted to hospital.

I publicly thank the staff who work with our mental health patients. They are hugely dedicated and caring, and they do a difficult job in increasingly difficult circumstances. I assure them and the House that their efforts do not go unnoticed or unappreciated, and I commend that workforce for its commitment to helping others in their time of need.

Unfortunately, it is highly likely that those pressures will continue as the mental health surge that we have all

been anticipating hits home over the coming months. My Department is taking actions to help and support those who deliver services. In the short term, a regional bed flow network has been established, but, for the longer term, I have recently approved the policy direction for psychiatric low-secure inpatient and mental health rehabilitation services. While that is likely to have a positive impact on patient outcomes and pressures on the system, it will require additional investment.

The mental health action plan also committed to developing a new 10-year strategy for mental health in Northern Ireland. That, I believe, is the best way to address the historical issues facing mental health services; to face up to and meet the increased demand caused by the pandemic; and to put in place real and lasting change that will significantly improve mental health outcomes for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Members will be aware that, in December last year, I published for public consultation a draft mental health strategy for 2021-2031. That followed an intensive period of co-production, even during the pandemic. The consultation concluded at the end of March this year. In total, 428 responses were received, with over 82% assessed as positive. That strategy is my Department's long-term strategic plan to address the pressure on mental health inpatient beds, to meet the increased needs created by the pandemic and to put mental health on an even footing with physical health in this country. I hope to publish the final strategy in the summer of this year, together with a funding plan setting out the resource requirements to implement it. The final strategy will seek to draw clear linkages with the new substance use strategy, which, along with the Protect Life 2 strategy, I hope to publish in the next few months. Those three strategies are hugely important as we seek to make significant positive changes to the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, despite the great strides forward that we as a society have made in talking about mental health and despite the progress over the past year, I must also reflect the reality of the funding position. As Members know, historically, mental health services in Northern Ireland have, compared with other UK jurisdictions, been underfunded. Mental health in Northern Ireland receives between 25% and 30% less funding per capita than England, despite many indications that mental health needs in this country are greater, not least because of the legacy of the Troubles. That equates to a funding gap of approximately £100 million to £150 million a year, which is a dire reflection of the low priority that we as a society and a Government have afforded to mental health until now. The particularly difficult funding position that my Department currently faces does not make redressing that imbalance any easier, and the capital budget position remains severely constrained. Full implementation of the strategy, which all stakeholders fully support, will require significant investment. Securing that investment to achieve what we want and what society deserves will require full support from the Executive and the Assembly. We must now walk the talk. If we are truly serious about making mental health a priority, which many in the Government and the House genuinely want to do, we have to do our utmost to get the resources in place.

One of my most significant actions in recent weeks was the establishment of the £10 million mental health support

fund. That will provide grants to charitable organisations that provide interventions to improve the population's mental health. In recognition of the fantastic work of the community and voluntary sector, the new fund will equip and enable those charitable organisations to provide a wide range of support services for people with mental ill health and help to ensure continued access to mental health support services in the community for those who need them. Many of those services have been named today. The fund is expected to open formally before the summer and will be accessible through the Community Foundation website.

In closing, I thank colleagues on the Health Committee for tabling the motion, which I fully support, and I thank all Members who spoke for the tone, tenor and content of their contributions. We need to take every opportunity to encourage people to talk about mental health, whether that is in the Assembly, on television, in the workplace or in private. I assure Members and the public that I remain committed to improving mental health services and mental health outcomes for all the people of Northern Ireland. The challenges ahead might seem insurmountable, but, if we all continue to work together, we can overcome them to make a significant, lasting and positive difference for all the people of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee, Mrs Pam Cameron, to make a winding-up speech on the motion.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank all the Members and the Minister for their contributions, some of which have been very personal. I greatly appreciate them. The debate has been a good opportunity to talk about mental health and to acknowledge that we all have mental health and that, at times, our mental health may go up or down. The key point is that we need to provide support to those who need it at the time that they need it.

When making a winding-up speech, Members normally outline the comments made by other Members. Members' comments are on the record, however, and, this afternoon, I want to give a voice to the young people whom we met last week, who outlined the very real impact that lockdown has had on them. They provided their thoughts and ideas about how we can improve access to services for children and young people. The comments from those young people were interesting and challenging. The young people outlined their worries and fears over the periods of lockdown. Many of them were primarily concerned about the impact of COVID, not on them but on their families. They had concerns about their parents' work and businesses and the health and well-being of their parents, grandparents and siblings. That reflects very well our young people.

At that meeting, the young people talked about the difficulties that they faced during lockdown. They raised issues such as lack of access to their friends and to a normal routine. They all outlined that they find online classes difficult, and some of them mentioned that their grades suffered as a result of the change to schooling. They mentioned that they missed hanging out with their friends, participating in sports and going to youth clubs and discos. They spoke of the role that they and their peers play in one another's mental health and well-being. They are the ones who can identify when their friends are

struggling and talk to their friends about the issues that they face.

The young people outlined that there is additional stress due to inconsistent advice about school exams. They also came up with great ideas for addressing some of those issues. They were clear that they fear not being heard and that they want to be involved in contributing to decisions that are made about them.

We need to be creative in our solutions, and our children and young people are best placed to inform policy. The issues faced today are very different from the issues that we faced growing up. Today, it is all about social media and pressures relating to access to and the cost of further and higher education.

We need to listen to the children and young people. Some of their comments were challenging. They outlined that discussions about health and well-being in schools can sometimes feel like box-ticking exercises and that there can be too much talk about mental health and not enough action. The young people outlined that it may be good to provide more information and workshops on well-being through youth clubs and sporting organisations, and that that could be a route to normalising conversations on well-being.

We heard from a member of staff based in Beechcroft, who shared the experiences of young people who are based there and spoke of the difficulties that they face. Those include being restricted from leaving the site, having poor internet connection and having restricted access to outside space and visitation. All those difficulties have a negative effect on the mental health and well-being of vulnerable children and young people. We need to do our best to protect and support those vulnerable children and young people.

The Chair outlined the lengthy waiting list for our children and young people in accessing CAMHS. There are over 900 people on the waiting list, over 380 of whom have been waiting for over nine weeks. Supporting our young people in a timely manner must be a priority for the Minister. The Committee will keep prioritising this issue. We look forward to seeing the mental health strategy soon and hope that it clearly outlines how the Department will address the very real issues that people face.

We welcome the Department's 'Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing' publication and the Protect Life 2 suicide prevention strategy. We underline that those strategies are key to addressing some of the issues that communities face. We need to see the Protect Life 2 strategy being resourced and monitored. Our young people need to understand that it is OK not to be OK, but that it is also OK to be OK. They are not alone. If they are struggling, I encourage our children and young people to speak to someone whom they trust: a family member, a friend or a teacher. I encourage them to connect and to share their worries and fears.

I will share a quote from Christopher Robin of 'Winnie-the-Pooh' fame:

*"Promise me you'll always remember: You're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think."*

With your indulgence, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will make some remarks as the DUP health spokesperson. We fully support the motion and the overriding principle of achieving parity of esteem between mental and physical health.

We understand the mental health crisis that is engulfing our society. Too often, we see lives devastated following suicide. For others, it has been about the debilitating impact of mental illness on the lives of individuals and families. There has been too much suffering and heartbreak, and there is a great need for support and intervention.

### 3.15 pm

We have done a great deal of talking about mental health need in Northern Ireland, but we have not necessarily backed it up with meaningful action. That can be evidenced by funding. The funding deficit for mental health services in Northern Ireland, despite our 25% higher rate of incidence, is simply not sustainable and must be addressed by a strategic, targeted investment programme moving forward. I welcome the Minister's announcement of a mental health fund, as it is long overdue. It is scandalous that, in our society, we have counselling services that do amazing, life-saving, life-improving work yet they have nowhere to turn to for funding. They turn to their local trust to battle for access to support. They turn to their council, which has no statutory basis to support mental health. Those issues need to be addressed now.

The use of single-year budgets severely hampers the ability to plan or to develop services and the workforce. Furthermore, psychiatry and other specialisms have high staff vacancy rates, and we need to invest in graduate and training places and incentivise the expansion of the mental health workforce.

We need a specific focus on the mental health and well-being of our young people. The isolation of lockdown has exacerbated many issues. Research has shown that half of mental health disorders develop before the age of 18, so it is vital that there be a strong focus on prevention, resilience and early intervention, particularly in vulnerable families, in deprived areas and in circumstances of substance misuse. Earlier intervention in all aspects of mental illness can promote better short- and long-term outcomes. A focus on mental health passports is key to that, particularly as we know that the incidence of illness among children and young people is increasing, and there is a requirement to be able to track previous interaction with services in order to avoid duplication of work.

I want to highlight the key issue of eating disorders. Recently, I met Nichola from Beat, which is an eating disorder charity and support organisation, and she outlined the dramatic rise in cases. Eating disorders are a serious mental illness that affect people of all ages, genders and backgrounds. One in six young people in Northern Ireland experiences disordered eating. In 2020, Beat received 120% more calls to its helpline from people in Northern Ireland than it did in 2019. The number of referrals to eating disorder services increased by 43% between March 2019 and September 2020. It is a matter of concern, as, according to the draft mental health strategy, outcomes for patients with eating disorders in Northern Ireland are lower than those for patients in close jurisdictions.

I welcome the comments in the mental health action plan about reviewing eating disorder services and developing a new service model. I ask the Minister to ensure that the voluntary sector and those with lived experience are included in co-designing and co-producing the new regional eating disorder service model. The new model must be accompanied by measurable targets to support early access to specialist treatment, with sufficient investment to make targets achievable. The time has gone. The overriding message has to be about the need for action, not words. We need delivery, not dithering, because, as a society that spends £7 million a year on antidepressants, we have a mental health pandemic that needs life-saving intervention.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes that the week commencing 10 May was Mental Health Awareness Week, which annually provides the opportunity to highlight the importance of mental health; further notes the 2021 health inequalities report, which identified continuing mental health inequalities; recognises the detrimental impact that COVID-19 has had on the mental health and well-being of the population, including our children and young people; further recognises the positive public health campaigns around mental health, such as Take 5; advocates that people seek support to talk about their mental health; and supports the Minister of Health to achieve parity of esteem between mental and physical health by increasing spending on mental health services, fully implementing the Protect Life 2 strategy and progressing the 10-year mental health and substance use strategies.*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments. We will move on to the next item of business after there is a change at the top Table. Thank you very much.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Private Members' Business

### Public Inquiry into the Murder of Human Rights Lawyer Pat Finucane

**Mr G Kelly:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes that it is 31 years since the murder of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane, and almost 20 years since the British Government committed to a full and independent public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the murder; further notes the Supreme Court ruling that there has not been an article 2 compliant inquiry into the murder; is concerned at the refusal of the British Government to hold the public inquiry that they promised; is further concerned that the British Government's approach risks undermining wider confidence in the rule of law and the administration of justice; reiterates that a public inquiry is the most effective means to get the truth about the scope and extent of state collusion in this murder; urges the British Government, in the public interest, to reconsider their response to the Supreme Court ruling; recognises, on 12 March 2021, the reopening of supervision by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers into the murder of Pat Finucane; further recognises the significance of this unusual step by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, which acknowledged, with profound concern, the delay in ongoing legacy cases generally whilst resuming supervision of measures by the UK Government in order to ensure they are adequate, sufficient and timely; calls on the British Government to establish the Historical Investigations Unit and the other Stormont House Agreement legacy mechanisms so that families of all victims have access to human rights-compliant investigations; and further calls on the British Government to initiate the independent, public inquiry they promised to the family of Pat Finucane in 2001.*

**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. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr G Kelly:** I am grateful to be afforded the opportunity to speak on a very important cross-party motion.

I acknowledge that any discussion of legacy matters brings with it a number of different views and perspectives. I am aware that there are many families across the whole community who live with the consequences of the death or injury of a loved one and that, even with the passing of time, the loss and pain do not diminish. Members do not need me to tell them how difficult the consequences are to deal with.

I do not underestimate the challenge involved in dealing with legacy matters. That does not mean, however, that we should shy away from those challenges, nor should it be beyond us to conduct the debate in a respectful manner. In its response to the NIO legacy consultation, Sinn Féin called on the British Government to fulfil outstanding

Weston Park legacy agreements and to hold a public inquiry into the state killing of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane. In setting out our remarks, I will speak to the facts of Pat Finucane's killing and the need to answer the family's key question about who pulled the trigger. I will also ask this: who pulled the strings?

Human rights lawyer Pat Finucane was killed at his family home, 32 years ago, on 12 February 1989. For 32 years, the Finucane family has spoken the truth to all who would listen. The family has been an inspiration to many others who have sought the truth during that period. The Finucane family believe that the killing of Pat, a much-loved son, brother, husband and father, was British-state-sponsored murder. It is known that the man who killed Pat, the man who provided the weapon and the man who provided the intelligence were all British state agents. It is known that the Force Research Unit (FRU) inserted Brian Nelson, who was on the MI5 payroll, into the UDA. Nelson was involved in countless killings himself. It is known that, of the 210 people arrested as part of the Stevens investigations, only three were not working for the British state. It is known that 85% of UDA intelligence came from British security force sources. The UDA was not proscribed until 1992. These facts provide clear evidence that agents of the state were directly involved in authorising and planning the killing. On the balance of probability, there is general acceptance that an officer or officers from the RUC did propose Pat Finucane as a target for assassination. That is why former British Prime Minister David Cameron himself acknowledged that there had been "shocking" levels of collusion in the killing.

Yet, while the facts are clearly accepted, they do not address questions of public interest that should concern all citizens. Who ordered the killing, and why? Who knew what, and when? Thirty-two years on, these questions have not been answered. It is a statement of fact that the British Government have frustrated and blocked answers to these questions. They even brought in an Inquiries Act in 2005 to secure secrecy around the role of the state in the killing. That is despite a political commitment by the British Government at the Weston Park talks in 2001 to hold a public inquiry.

The Supreme Court ruled in February 2019 that all previous reviews, including the Stevens Inquiries, the work of Judge Cory and the research of Desmond de Silva, were incapable of establishing the full facts, failed to meet article 2 standards, were not effective and did not fulfil international human rights standards. The publicly known facts clearly indicate a web of conspiracy and deceit and that there was an overarching state conspiracy. The British Government's strategy was clear. They used key figures in the UDA as their proxies to advance a policy of state-sponsored killings. Concealing the level of state involvement is the real reason why, after 32 years, there has been no public inquiry. The British Government's approach of resisting investigation into the killing and their role in the conflict more generally should concern all of us, particularly now that they seek to introduce an amnesty for state actors.

On 24 November 2020, Members of the US House of Representatives expressed concern that:

*"the British government has refused to live up to its responsibility, and is violating its commitments to establish the inquiry."*

I can only conclude that the decision by Brandon Lewis to resist the public inquiry, and to involve the PSNI and the Police Ombudsman, amounts to more of the same tactic of obstruction, frustration and delay. The responses from both Governments to his decision are instructive. The Office of the Police Ombudsman has said:

*"at this stage events connected to the murder of Pat Finucane are not central to any of our ongoing investigations".*

Alongside that, the PSNI said that there were:

*"currently no new lines of inquiry".*

A four-party letter that was signed and sent to Brandon Lewis, urging him to consider his response to the Supreme Court ruling, stated:

*"Both responses raise serious questions about your decision, your approach and why you have rejected a public inquiry."*

At its core, the British approach is to delay, frustrate and deny accountability.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr G Kelly:** No.

It is long past time that the British Government's policy and practice of collusion was subject to a public inquiry and, indeed, the rule of law. In summary, the killing of Pat Finucane is a matter of significant public interest. This is not an issue for narrow politicking and political consideration.

The scale of concern about legacy cases has been acknowledged by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers in Strasbourg, which has reopened the supervision of the Finucane case.

### 3.30 pm

The unanswered questions around the killing are very much an open wound for the Finucane family. With all other avenues exhausted, there is only one investigative option left to the Finucane family that can examine information and compel and cross-examine witnesses: a full public inquiry. Only a public inquiry can assist the family to get to the truth about the scope and extent of British state collusion in the killing.

The decision by the British Government to block a full public inquiry is a matter of public and international interest. I urge Members to support the motion and call on the British Government to hold a public inquiry into the killing of Pat Finucane in 1989.

I will finish on this point. Sometimes people say, "Why the Pat Finucane case?" Remember that, at Weston Park, it was agreed that five investigations would go ahead. Four went ahead. Pat Finucane's case did not. If what happened to Pat Finucane is not exposed and admitted by the Government, it can happen again to anyone.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call Paul Frew, I note that some devices are interfering with the recording system. Maybe people could desist from using their devices.

**Mr Frew:** The murder of Pat Finucane was an abhorrent and appalling act that could never, should never and will never be justified. We recognise the devastation of that loss for the family, and we do not wish to add to anyone's pain. The Finucane family, like so many others, deserve justice.

This particular case has had Weston Park, the Cory inquiry, the de Silva report, the offer of public inquiry legislation, which was rejected, and, most importantly, a criminal trial and successful conviction. There were other murders. Are we in danger of creating a hierarchy of investigations if we do not remember all the victims, all the unsolved murders and all the investigations yet to be concluded?

I think today of the 211 RUC widows and of the victims of La Mon, Kingsmills, Bloody Friday, Teebane and Narrow Water. Is it right that the House can select individual cases for special treatment when so many families are still grieving their loss, impacted day by day, with no prospect of justice? With no prospect of justice, they have no prospect of truth, and that is just as harmful.

I say that because I believe that, at the source of the motion, there is hypocrisy from Sinn Féin. We saw Sinn Féin's refusal to cooperate with Smithwick or any other legacy investigation. I ask the parties that purport to occupy the middle ground why they would place more significance or importance on one case or another, instead of all the cases that remain unsolved.

Every family and every victim should be treated equally. Every person involved in wrongdoing must be held accountable in a fair and even-handed way. Consideration of whether to grant a public inquiry in this case must include consideration of all the other unresolved cases. It is not, on its own, good enough to suggest that attention should be on this one, albeit very serious, case, simply because of suspected collusion by security services or British intelligence or individuals within.

We know from numerous security reports and personal accounts that the IRA and other terrorist death organisations were heavily infiltrated by informants and agents. That fact alone is why so many people are alive today, and it is the single biggest reason why the IRA was defeated. That is an undeniable fact. With that in mind, I will ask this: what about the victims of terrorist violence? What about the many innocent people who were gunned down on their doorstep, at their work or travelling home from work and whose families have never received justice, a trial, a conviction or even the truth?

As a political party aspiring for power, Sinn Féin cannot expect the Government in power, or any Government for that matter, be it a British or an Irish Government, to be on a higher plane than itself or to set a level higher than it sets as a political party. Whilst I will fight tooth and nail for truth and transparency, that goes across the board. I appeal to Sinn Féin as a party to tell us what it knows. Mr Kelly, a colleague across the way —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Frew:** — asked a number of questions. Who pulled the strings? Who ordered the killings? Who knew what and when? If only Sinn Féin would open up and tell us the truth.

**Ms Mallon:** I thank those Members from across the parties, including my party colleague Dolores Kelly, for

tabling this important motion. I will begin by paying tribute to the family of Pat Finucane, which, led with such dignity by his wife, Geraldine, has been campaigning in the face of obstruction for truth following the brutal murder of Pat in 1989.

Pat Finucane was having Sunday lunch with his family in north Belfast when he was murdered in front of his children. His wife was left without her soulmate, and his children were left without their father. That family has not only had to struggle with the pain and trauma of that horrific act, which it was forced to witness, but has had to battle for the truth, and it continues to battle for the truth. The murder and the ongoing failure by the British Government to honour the commitment that it made to the Finucane family is shameful.

Yesterday, I stood in this spot speaking about the Ballymurphy families. Today, I stand speaking about the Finucane family.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member address Mr Frew's point about how it should never be about one family over another?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Ms Mallon:** I absolutely will. While yesterday I stood speaking about the Ballymurphy families and today I am speaking about the Finucane family, the truth is that I could stand here every day talking about the many, many families who have been denied and continue to be denied truth and justice for the lives of their loved ones, which were stolen by state or paramilitary violence.

Last year, the SDLP leader, Colum Eastwood, stood in the House of Commons and pressed the British Government to act in the case of Pat Finucane. In calling them out, Colum Eastwood said:

*"It means that a previous British Government murdered a human rights lawyer in Belfast in front of his family and that they have denied every single opportunity to give the family what they absolutely deserve, which is the full truth in the matter."*

In the words of the former British Prime Minister David Cameron, there were "shocking levels of ... collusion" involved in what happened to Pat Finucane: shocking levels of collusion.

The truth is that the British state murdered Pat Finucane, a loving husband and father from North Belfast. The British state murdered a human rights lawyer in Belfast and, by extension, attacked the justice system in Northern Ireland. The British state murdered him in front of his young family, and consecutive British Governments have denied Geraldine Finucane and her family access to the truth and justice that they deserve. The question today is this: what are the British Government going to do about it? When are they going to honour the commitments and agreements they have made? For all our differences in this place, we all know that victims across our society have been shamefully treated.

We know that the British Government would prefer that it was all swept under the carpet. However, there can be no amnesty for perpetrators of violence, from wherever they come. All victims deserve legacy to be dealt with once and for all, and that means getting at the truth. If we do not deal with that properly and establish the mechanisms to access



the truth, we will deny current and future generations a way forward. The only way forward is through access to truth, justice and accountability. Therefore, today, we must unite and send a clear message that no one can be denied the truth. We in this place have a responsibility to seek and expose the truth. We have a responsibility to all victims to support them to get that truth and justice.

For the Finucane family, that means ensuring that they get the full public inquiry that they were promised back in 2001. The British Government cannot and must not be allowed to cover up that murder. The British Government cannot and must not be allowed to treat the Finucane family, or any family, with such contempt, as they have done for many years. Without the truth, we simply cannot heal. Anyone who has met and listened to victims will know that pain and grief are compounded by the trauma and hardship of being denied access to the truth.

In closing, I make this very clear to the British Government: if they take the same approach to legacy as they have taken to Pat Finucane's case, which is to lie, deny and cover up the truth, they will not have the SDLP's support in making their legislation. We want to get to the truth. While we will always work to access the truth, we will not accept less than what victims deserve. We need to get back to the Stormont House Agreement and deal with the past with full judicial power. If we do not, not only will victims of our past be failed but future generations will be infected by the hurt and pain of our conflict.

**Mr Beattie:** I reflect on Mr Kelly's words at the start, which were that the debate should be dignified because we are talking about victims. I will attempt to be dignified. However, I must say that I am disappointed with the motion, which was an opportunity to say that many people out there are suffering and deserve justice in exactly the same way.

Without a shadow of doubt, Mr Finucane deserves justice. However, the moment that we start to categorise and say that, because he was a lawyer, he deserves something extra, we forget about the rest. What about members of the judiciary? Resident Magistrate William Staunton was murdered in 1973 outside a secondary school. Resident Magistrate Martin McBirney was murdered in 1974. Judge Rory Conaghan was murdered in 1974. Judge William Doyle was murdered in 1983 as he left midnight mass. Elected UUP member Edgar Graham was murdered outside Queen's University in 1983. Judge Maurice Gibson, who was in his seventies, and his wife were murdered in 1987. All those murders were wrong. All those victims deserve justice. However, the opportunity that is missed by the wording of the motion absolutely belittles those very people. We need only have put in the motion that we reflect on those murders, because they were an assault on our judiciary.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Member for giving way and for the positive way in which he has conducted himself, as has everyone, in the debate. Does he agree that those attacks were not only on the individuals but on justice itself and that it was to undermine justice that those people were slain?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Beattie:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Absolutely, and that categorises why people try to get rid of those who are from the justice community, including Mr

Finucane, who — I will say it again and will always say it — absolutely deserves truth and justice, as does his family. However, let us not forget the likes of magistrate Thomas Travers, whose whole family they tried to exterminate. They tried to murder him. They tried to murder his wife. They murdered his daughter Mary, a 22-year-old teacher, as she was coming out of mass. That was an assault on the judiciary.

The motion includes not even a passing comment on any of those murders.

That is why I say that it is an opportunity lost. I can stand up and say that it is an opportunity lost, so I would not support the motion because I do want to see justice for Pat Finucane. However, I cannot support the motion because I do not support the Stormont House Agreement. It is an amnesty for perpetrators, and you have all signed up to it. The Ulster Unionist Party may well be the outliers, but we have not signed up to the Stormont House Agreement, because, under it, if you lost your legs, if you were burned, if you were blind, if you were psychologically damaged, if you were left in a wheelchair and nobody was killed, you would not get an investigation. Under that agreement, if you are kidnapped in Northern Ireland, taken across the border into the Irish Republic, tortured and murdered, you do not get an investigation because the agreement is geographically fixed. If you had a HET desktop review, you would not get an investigation. That is the reality of it.

### 3.45 pm

People have said to me multiple times that the Stormont House Agreement is not perfect. Of course it is not perfect, but, under that agreement, it is an amnesty for those people because there were no fatalities. That is why we cannot support it. That is the reality. That is what you are saying. In one breath, you are saying to everybody, "We do not support amnesties", and, in the second breath, you are saying, "As long as there was no fatality, I am happy enough to support that guy not being brought up". In case anybody thinks that I am extrapolating something that is not there, the first thing that I did when I became the justice spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party was to write to the PSNI and ask, "What happens to the injured? Do they get an investigation?". The police replied that they had no obligation to investigate when there was no fatality.

We cannot support the Stormont House Agreement. That is what is in the motion, and that is why we cannot support it. I know that we are the only ones. Some Members may agree with me and others may not, but I am being truthful and factual, and we cannot support the motion for that very reason.

**Mr Muir:** As other Members referenced, I hope that this is a respectful debate. The brutal murder of Pat Finucane 31 years ago in front of his wife and three young children was a despicable crime. Since the day of the murder, the Finucane family has campaigned with great dignity for the full independent public inquiry that it was promised by the UK Government in 2004.

The Supreme Court's 2019 ruling that none of the previous investigations had been compliant with article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights was unambiguous. On behalf of the Alliance Party, my colleague Stephen Farry MP strongly opposed the Secretary of State's decision earlier this year not to

announce a full independent public inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane.

Where there is clear evidence of state collusion, as the UK Government have recognised in this case and as Nichola Mallon outlined, there are serious public interest issues at stake. That is why a full independent public inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane, with the power to compel documents and witnesses, is necessary. Nothing short of that will suffice. The reason for that is that the state has a fundamental duty to protect its citizens from harm.

The state did that in many instances, courtesy of the numerous brave men and women who served in our security forces, too many of whom were killed and injured. That is a fact that I know all too well from people whom I know who were injured or left bereaved as a result of serving or having family members murdered.

Today, however, we are talking about the state failing in its duty to protect its citizens from harm and the extent to which it was found to be involved in collusion, resulting in the death of a citizen. For such a thing to occur is a grave matter of serious concern. On those occasions, a full, complete, thorough and open public inquiry is essential to give a comprehensive, open and transparent understanding of what happened.

In speaking in support of today's motion, I know that there will be a view from some on why there is not also a motion regarding their loved ones who were brutally murdered during the Troubles. The pain of those families is no less important or less great than anyone else's. Far too many crimes occurred during our Troubles, all of which I condemn. The failure to deliver comprehensively for all victims continues to inhibit efforts to build reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Humphrey:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I am pleased to hear him say that he condemns all violence and murders in Northern Ireland. Is the problem not that the party proposing the motion simply does not and will not do that? The other difficulty is that it continues to glorify terrorists and terrorism. On many occasions, key members of that party in this House have done just that.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Muir:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention.

In order to build reconciliation and a shared future, we need to address our past adequately. That requires some people to come to the debate and discussion with a degree of honesty and grace and a degree of understanding of the hurt that was caused and to have the ability to bring themselves to apologise for some of that. Thus far, that has been lacking in many instances in Northern Ireland.

It is the responsibility of all parties in the Chamber, along with the British and Irish Governments, to find a way forward to deliver for all victims. Legacy issues cannot continue to be dealt with in a piecemeal fashion, which is unfair to those who should be at the forefront of our mind in all such matters: the victims. The Alliance Party continues to support the provisions of the Stormont House Agreement. In cases in which there is evidence of collusion, wherever that collusion may come from and whoever is behind it, it must be fully exposed. The Alliance Party fully acknowledges the pain and suffering of all victims and survivors of Troubles-related murders. We

continue to champion an approach that is victim-centred and that facilitates the pursuit of truth and justice and the promotion of reconciliation.

The recent actions of the UK Government, including the failure to launch a public inquiry into the Pat Finucane murder and the proposals to introduce an amnesty for Troubles-related cases and how that was announced, show a deeply concerning, callous and cavalier attitude to victims and survivors. The actions of the UK Government reflect an abandonment of the Stormont House Agreement, which, although imperfect, remains the most viable way in which to deal with legacy issues in Northern Ireland.

I conclude by paying tribute to all victims and survivors of the Troubles and their families, including the Finucane family, as they continue to seek truth and justice. It is imperative that everyone in the Assembly work together to honour our commitments to them.

**Ms Ennis:** I support the motion. Following on from what my colleague Gerry Kelly said earlier, I, too, am aware that so many families across our community live with the consequences of the death or injury of a loved one during the conflict. For the record, all those families deserve answers and as much information as possible. Today, however, we are speaking about the state-sponsored murder of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane in 1989.

Commitments were made 20 years ago at Weston Park to hold an inquiry into the state killing of Pat Finucane. Twenty years on, there is still no inquiry. People may ask why. The simple answer is that it is to deny truth to the Finucane family about the British state's role in the planning, orchestration and, ultimately, cover-up of the killing. It is also about continuing the practice of impunity for those in the upper echelons of the British establishment who developed the policy of collusion, gave the orders and pulled the strings of those involved.

During the Stormont House Agreement negotiations in 2014, it was very clear to us from engagements at the time that the families wanted choices when seeking answers about the loss of a loved one. Some families wanted information. Others wanted a storytelling option, while others wanted investigations. What was most clear was that they wanted to make the choice. Despite widespread public support for key elements of the Stormont House Agreement and strong opposition to any form of amnesty, statements by the British Government represent a clear and cynical departure from the policy intent and the mechanisms outlined in that agreement.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Ennis:** No, I will not. Thank you.

The British Government's real intent to legacy was laid bare in a Westminster statement on 18 March 2020 from Brandon Lewis. That represents a significant, considered and calculated breach of trust. What we are now witnessing is the outworking of the same approach to the Finucane family: the lack of progress on implementing the Stormont House Agreement. Yet again, the British Government enter into agreements and then simply refuse to implement them. In a brazen manner, they stonewall and drag their feet. They care little for the delay and frustration caused to families. Just look at how they treated the Ballymurphy families last week. Despite having 50 years

to prepare, they could not deliver a meaningful apology, because they just do not care enough about Irish lives.

I set all that out to make the point that, when it comes to legacy, the British Government's primary focus above all else is to protect their own narrative of the conflict, to protect their own forces and to shut down any investigation of their role in the conflict. Where else would you get a Prime Minister acknowledging "shocking levels of collusion" in the killing but then refusing to direct an investigation?

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Ennis:** No, thank you.

They do not want any investigation of the killing of Pat Finucane, because they know what happened. They wrote the script, and, to this day, they continue with the cover-up. In refusing to direct a public inquiry, the British Government are covering up state — state — murder. That should concern everybody in the House, and that must be exposed and challenged.

I urge Members to support the motion and to support a public inquiry into the British state killing of Pat Finucane.

**Ms Dillon:** I thank the Members who have contributed to the debate so far. I support the motion. At the outset, I would like to acknowledge what we are talking about. We are talking about the murder of a loving father, a husband, a brother and a son. My thoughts as we speak to the motion are with the Finucane family and all the families that lost loved ones during the conflict.

This is a family that has been fighting now for over 30 years for the basic right of an article 2 compliant investigation of the killing, and we are 20 years after a commitment from the British Government themselves to hold a public inquiry. The family deserves to have closure. They deserve to be able to grieve and finally lay Pat to rest in the knowledge that an inquiry has been carried out and that the truth has been laid bare about the events of that day. In the words of a previous British Conservative Prime Minister, as has been outlined by other Members, there were "shocking levels of collusion" in the killing of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane.

This is not an ask of me, Linda Dillon. It is not an ask of Sinn Féin or the SDLP. Indeed, three separate reviews — by Judge Cory, Lord Stevens and Sir Desmond de Silva — found that there was state collusion in the killing. Yet here we are, 17 years after Judge Cory's findings and recommendation that there be a public inquiry, and this family is still waiting, still campaigning and still fighting for the basic right of an article 2 compliant, independent investigation of the killing of Pat Finucane, which, the Supreme Court has ruled, has not yet been carried out.

I was elected to the Assembly in 2016. I was part of the team that negotiated with the two Governments and all the other parties, including the Ulster Unionists, to get the Stormont House mechanisms that had been agreed in 2014 implemented. I accept that those mechanisms are not perfect, but I can categorically state that they do not provide an amnesty for anyone, and there is nothing to prevent further investigation of any issue. It may not be provided for in the agreement, but there is nothing there to prevent it, so it is an amnesty of no type, shape or fashion.

I would also like to acknowledge that those were the mechanisms that were consulted on. There was an overwhelming response to the consultation of over 17,500 people. Earlier, the Health Minister said that there were, I think, 468 responses to his mental health consultation. That is a massive issue, which we all have an interest in, here in the North at this very time. A total of 17,500 people, many of whom were victims or had lost loved ones, responded to that consultation. They acknowledged that it was not perfect.

It does not give them everything that they want, but it gives them the best opportunity to have, at the very minimum, an article 2 compliant independent investigation, and then an opportunity for truth and justice. It is not a certainty — I accept that — but at least an opportunity.

**4.00 pm**

**Mr Storey:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Dillon:** No.

At what point will the British Government stand by the agreements that they made in relation to a full public inquiry into the killing of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane and to implement the agreed mechanisms so that all families, right across our community, can access the truth? Everyone has a right to an article 2 investigation into the death of their loved ones. Everyone is entitled to have timely access to due process. Everyone has a right to have access to agreed processes to obtain information recovery. Those rights and entitlements are for all of our citizens, irrespective of their background or political persuasion. That is the right of the Finucane family, and I ask all of you in the House to support the motion and make it clear that you are supportive of all victims of the conflict getting access to those rights.

**Mr Storey:** I had not intended to speak, but having listened to contributions from the party opposite, I want to make a public plea in the Assembly today. When are we going to get the truth about the IRA? The murder of Pat Finucane — and that is what it was. Let us not try to equivocate; that is what it was. But there are families in Northern Ireland today who know who pulled the trigger and who committed the crime but, because of deals that have been done, whether for on-the-runs (OTRs), letters of comfort or royal pardons — let us think about the magnitude of this. Republicans who claim to be the real champions of the cause get a royal pardon from Her Majesty The Queen. That is how brave members of the IRA were.

Let us talk about truth. I mentioned it in the debate earlier today. The iconic figure in republicanism was Bobby Sands. We now know that a letter was sent from prison, and I am sure that the Member opposite, Mr Kelly, who was in prison, could tell us more about that. What did that letter tell us? That Bobby Sands's dying wish was that he not be buried in Milltown. Yet the republican agenda was more important.

**Mr Humphrey:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. The Members across the way talk about information being withheld — I have absolute sympathy around that; the House has condemned the murder of Mr Finucane and has called for justice for his family — but they may well have, and their organisation certainly does have, information about Jean McConville, who was abducted, murdered and disappeared by D company of the IRA in 1972. Her body

was not found until 2003, and her 10 children were left for all that time knowing nothing about their murdered mother.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Storey:** Thank you.

Sadly, we could go down a list. There is a call today for a public inquiry. Let us remind the House of the most expensive public inquiry that we have had in these islands — the Bloody Sunday inquiry. Let us remember that when that inquiry was held and people wanted to get to the truth, what did the late Martin McGuinness do when he went to the inquiry? He invoked the IRA code, the code of an illegal terrorist organisation that has created orphans and widows and destruction. They were no freedom fighters.

The party opposite wants to sanitise the past. Some of them, sadly, go to commemorations and eulogise, and then they come to the House and give a bland, "We're sorry". They do not do that when they put on paramilitary garb and commemorate the IRA, which was a terrorist organisation.

If we are going to get the truth, and if we want to know the truth, why did Martin McGuinness not tell the truth to the Bloody Sunday inquiry? Why do we not know the truth about Stakeknife, Fisherman and all the secret agents who were in the republican community? Let us have the truth — not part of the truth, not some of the truth — so that Northern Ireland can move on. I want this country and its people, from wherever they come, to live in peace, but we will not be able to achieve what we want to achieve when there are those who want to continue the dirty war in which our people were massacred by terrorist organisations. Let us have the truth; let us have it all.

**Mr Blair:** I will return, if I may, to the matters of the motion and address my remarks within its confines. I repeat, because it is worth repeating, that, 31 years on, questions remain unanswered about the killing of Pat Finucane, and only a public inquiry can now assist the Finucane family in getting truth about the scope and extent of state collusion in Pat Finucane's killing.

The UK Government have already accepted that collusion occurred in the case, and it has been almost 20 years since they committed to a full and independent public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the murder. The constant foot-dragging about an article 2 compliant investigation suggests an institutional resistance to the full discovery of the facts. Complete disclosure of the context around the murder is critical for the accountability and integrity of the rule of law.

The anger and frustration felt by many at the Government's approach and the decision not to hold a public inquiry are warranted and understandable. Holding a public inquiry is the only opportunity for the UK Government to restore wider confidence in the rule of law and the administration of justice. The failure of the UK Government to establish a public inquiry into the murder falls short of a Supreme Court ruling, which required an article 2 compliant investigation. That failure, of course, brings further delay to the Finucane family, who have shown great dignity in their pursuit of an outcome.

To Geraldine Finucane and the family, we can only say today that we share the frustration, and we offer our sympathy. Their story, like those of many others, is a stark reminder of the darker days, to which we as a people must

never return. Those of us who, as local representatives, stood with victims and families across north Belfast and Newtownabbey in so many instances in the 1980s and 1990s, which I did and which, I know, Members did in other places, know only too well the story to which I refer.

We are reminded that the Government approach is falling far short of the needs of victims. There are thousands of Troubles' victims who continue to seek truth and deserve justice. In the case that we are discussing today, a public inquiry is necessary and is due. Like my colleague Andrew Muir, who spoke earlier, I, with Alliance colleagues, support the motion.

**Mr Allister:** Of course the murder of Pat Finucane was foul and wrong, like every terrorist murder in the Province. Yes, there are things that set the Pat Finucane case apart, particularly when compared with the hundreds, nay thousands, of unsolved cases in the Province.

Here are some of the things that distinguish the Pat Finucane case. The family got a criminal trial. How many can say that? The family got international inquiries and the involvement of international judicial figures. How many can say that? The family got a prime ministerial apology. How many can say that? The family were offered a public inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005. How many can say that? When they were offered a public inquiry, in which a judge would have had powers to compel witnesses and command the production of papers, what did they do? They rejected it.

What did Mrs Geraldine Finucane do on 14 April 2005? She wrote to every senior judge in England, Scotland and Wales and urged them to not accept the appointment if they were asked to chair the public inquiry under the Inquiries Act. Those are the facts.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member also state the fact that the Secretary of State holds the power to invoke national security by withdrawing and refusing the disclosure of information to any inquiry that is established under that Inquiries Act?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Allister:** The Inquiries Act applies universally and equally to everyone. If the Member is saying that we need some sort of special treatment for this member of republican royalty and that the law of the land needs to be changed specially for them, let us hear it. Just like the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act 1921, the 2005 Act contains those necessary protections. That is what anyone else in this country has to operate under.

Mr Beattie rightly referred to many legal figures who were murdered. I would like to remember some of them. I knew some of them. He mentioned the very first one who was murdered in Northern Ireland: Resident Magistrate William Staunton, a Catholic who had the courage to serve. Next was Judge Rory Conaghan. Both of them were shot in front of their primary-school children. Robert McBirney, another magistrate, was murdered on the same morning as Magistrate Conaghan. What did the IRA say about the two murders that morning? It said that they were murdered because they were:

*"willing agents of a most corrupt, rotten and evil judicial system".*

That was the deference shown to legal judicial figures, and now we hear talk about some special treatment for the misnomer of a human rights lawyer. You are either a lawyer or you are not.

Then, of course, we come to the murder in early 1983 of a man I knew, Judge William Doyle. What was he doing? He was at Mass. He was giving a 72-year-old woman a lift in his car after Mass, and they were both shot. He was killed, and she was seriously injured. Sixteen months later, we had the attempt to wipe out the entire Travers family. Young Mary Travers was shot, again coming out of Mass. Her father was filled with bullets, and her mother survived only because the gun jammed. What was the Sinn Féin response? It was to make one of her murderers a special adviser in the House.

Then we had the murder of Lord Justice Maurice Gibson and his wife, Cecily. They were murdered at the border by a massive bomb. The couple were identifiable only by their dental records. Then there was an attempt to do the same with Judge Eoin Higgins, but they got the wrong family.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Allister:** They murdered the Hanna family —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Allister:** — from Hillsborough. So, when we consider the hypocrisy —

**4.15 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Allister:** — of Sinn Féin in constantly demanding special treatment and special status for Finucane —

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Allister, resume your seat.

**Mr Allister:** — let us remember those who were murdered by its organisation.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Allister, resume your seat, please. You are subject to the same rules and regulations of the House as every Member who has respectfully adhered to them.

**Mr Carroll:** In this past week, we all witnessed the importance of getting the truth and, finally, getting an acknowledgement that what happened to people's loved ones during the Troubles was wrong and deserves justice. The Ballymurphy families had to wait for five decades for the truth. Now, they begin a new battle for justice on the basis that their relatives, who were gunned down, were unarmed and innocent, which they knew all along.

It is unconscionable that the Finucane family should have to wait any longer for the inquiry that they were promised. It is an inquiry that they deserve. Not only do they deserve answers, they deserve justice. When the state is involved in killing citizens, there is an onus on all of us to demand such justice, and we know that the state was involved in the untimely and merciless murder of Pat Finucane by loyalist gunmen. It is in the interests of everyone that the state is held to account. Everybody — people in Belfast, people in Derry and people in between, people of all religions and none, and the people in England, such as the people of Grenfell and the family of Jean Charles de Menezes — has a right to truth and justice.

I offer my solidarity to Pat Finucane's family. They should never have had to experience what they did. That

they were forced to fight for the truth for decades after watching their father die is a damning indictment of the British Government's attempt to cover up their role in the Troubles to this day. Of course, that is what is behind Boris Johnson's proposed amnesty. It would keep high-ranking figures out of courtrooms lest that further expose their rotten legacy to the world. Protecting the top brass at all costs is what Boris Johnson is up to, and he needs to be resisted.

Cover-ups have never brought reconciliation. Denying justice is the antithesis of reconciliation. We have seen the hardship and the generational trauma that it inflicts. Johnson's call for truth and reconciliation has nothing to do with reconciling the past, and that does not even touch on the man's relationship with the truth, which no one should trust him to deliver. His response to the Ballymurphy inquiry verdict demonstrated his true motives and intent. If we want to see truth, reconciliation and justice, we will find it in the campaigns and the fight by communities, families and their supporters. That has ever been the case.

We support the motion, and we support the Finucane family. We hope that they get what they are fighting for. Mr Beattie referenced the Stormont House Agreement. Some families fear that its implementation might mean an amnesty for generals and troops. My party was not involved in that agreement. We had no MLAs at the time. My party and I will vigorously oppose any attempts, through any agreements, to issue an amnesty, especially for state forces.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Dolores Kelly to conclude the debate and make a winding-up speech on the motion.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am very mindful of the many families affected, as many contributors across all Benches said at the outset of their contributions to the debate. I recall that, when I was first elected as an MLA, one of the first constituents to visit was an elderly lady who sought my help to access the victims' fund for help with household furniture. She told me about the last day on which she saw her son. Her son, an innocent young man, was going to work when he was murdered by loyalist paramilitaries. On that morning, as he left for work, he turned at the end of the drive to wave goodbye to his mother. She said that, every morning, that was the first thing that she saw when she got up. For her, and for the many hundreds and thousands of bereaved families across Northern Ireland and beyond, there is no drawing a line in the sand. Every day is the same. All of us in the House recognise that. All grief transcends.

**Mr Muir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs D Kelly:** I will.

**Mr Muir:** Does the Member agree that saying, "We just need to move on", as some do, is one of the most callous and wicked things to say to people? I know one individual whose dad, who was serving in the forces, was brutally gunned down and murdered by the IRA. He still lives with the fact that he has no father. His mother, a widow, is still alive. Saying to people that they should just move on is not befitting, and it is not the victim-centred approach that we need.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I have not heard too many in the House talk about drawing a line in the sand and moving on.

I have heard elements in the British establishment talk about drawing a line. I have also heard it from other people outside here who may be well intentioned but perhaps have not had the level of engagement with victims that some of us have been privileged to have in getting to know them. For the Finucane family, like the Ballymurphy families, time stood still, and they still want answers.

I will address the concerns that Mr Beattie raised, as did some others, including Mr Carroll, about the Stormont House Agreement. Let us be very clear: the Stormont House Agreement is not an amnesty for anyone. That is why the British Government are looking at ways of drawing up an amnesty. Mr Beattie's point, which I understand completely, was about those who were severely injured. The Stormont House Agreement deals with those who were killed and murdered during the Troubles, not those who were heinously injured and still live with the consequences of that. Let us not muddy the waters: it never was, nor should it ever be, about an amnesty.

The case of Pat Finucane is of profound importance for society in Northern Ireland and those who believe in the rule of law. All the Members whom I heard contribute to the debate condemned the murder of Pat Finucane, and many condemned the refusal of the UK Government to hold a proper independent inquiry into the murder. The statement by the Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis, which referred to a police review of papers and a Police Ombudsman investigation, was simply a smokescreen and, as such, a further insult to the Finucane family and those who have supported them in their 30-year fight for truth and justice in the case.

Twenty years ago — many Members referred to this — the European Court of Human Rights delivered a damning judgement in *Finucane v UK*. The court found that the UK had breached the right to life, as protected by article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, through the flawed investigations, including those of the RUC, into Pat Finucane's murder. The Secretary of State has failed to honour a commitment to hold an independent public inquiry into the murder following the UK and Ireland's Weston Park Agreement in 2001. Many Members highlighted the fact that, over two years ago, the UK Supreme Court found that previous reviews carried out by Lord Stevens, Justice Cory and Sir Desmond de Silva failed to meet the requisite investigative standards of article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights even when they were considered cumulatively.

There are questions, and one that many people pose is: what are the British Government trying to hide? We know that Pat Finucane was murdered in front of his family — Ms Mallon laid that out very clearly — and that there were shocking levels of state collusion in the murder because David Cameron apologised for it. We do not know, as Mr Kelly said in his opening remarks, the details and how far up the chain of command the collusion went. We need to know which state agent was involved, who authorised the murder and their level and who was complicit in the 30-year cover-up. A narrowly focused police investigation will not find that out, and nor will an even more narrowly focused Police Ombudsman process. Only a fully effective public inquiry, with wide-reaching terms of reference and, importantly, the powers to compel, can discover the truth. We have seen the resources that the Police Ombudsman and the legacy bodies such as the HET require, yet their

work has been severely hampered and cut back over the past few years. Some argue that not giving sufficient resources to those agencies is in itself a breach of article 2.

Mr Frew talked about other murders and a hierarchy of investigations. As I said at the beginning, no one here wants a hierarchy of victims. I have not heard that from any of the Benches, although some might suggest that it is the case. There is an obligation, as Mr Muir said, to get reconciliation. In moving Northern Ireland forward, Mr Storey, we need to get to the truth of the past, and people need reconciliation.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will she accept that one of the things that have created such a problem is that, every time the party opposite is involved in negotiations, the first thing is not deprivation in west Belfast or education but what dirty deal it can do to get letters of comfort and have no ballistics from decommissioning so that no one can be taken to court? That is what we are dealing with, and that is the problem that has corrupted the process of truth and justice in Northern Ireland. They come to the House today and want everyone to open their cupboards and tell everyone else's secrets apart from theirs.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I co-signed the motion, and, in my winding-up speech, I am not going to answer on behalf —.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs D Kelly:** I will.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The tone of the debate thus far has been largely respectful, apart from a number of contributions. In particular, I ask Mr Storey, who may be destined for high office, to reflect on his contribution, especially his latest contribution. There are strong differences in the Chamber about the past, but, if we are to work together in the future, we will have to learn to respect one another in the Chamber and outside of it.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I will return to the debate and Members' contributions. In trying to heal the divisions of the past, it is important that we get to the full truth. Surely we should all hold the power of the British Government to a greater standard than that for paramilitary organisations. As others have said, the current investigation being conducted by Mr Boutcher noted that extensive records are held by the Ministry of Defence, and, if some parties do not want to cough up, I am sure that the British Government could open their filing cabinets and fill in the gaps. As some Members have said, there was heavy infiltration, but it begs the question —.

**A Member:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs D Kelly:** I am sorry, but I do not have much time left.

As I was saying, it begs the question of who did what, when and why it is being covered up.

If we are to move forward, however, a strong message of support for the Finucane family's call for justice has to go out. Promises have been made to the Finucane family in agreements between Governments over various negotiations, and we should hold the state to a higher standard than paramilitary or any other types of organisations across these islands. I commend the motion to the House.

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided:  
Ayes 48; Noes 38.*

**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 Dillon and Ms Ennis.*

**NOES**

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie,  
Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan,  
Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler,  
Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds,  
Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan,  
Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons,  
Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton,  
Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stafford, Mr Stewart,  
Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Frew and Mr Nesbitt.*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes that it is 31 years since the murder of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane, and almost 20 years since the British Government committed to a full and independent public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the murder; further notes the Supreme Court ruling that there has not been an article 2 compliant inquiry into the murder; is concerned at the refusal of the British Government to hold the public inquiry that they promised; is further concerned that the British Government's approach risks undermining wider confidence in the rule of law and the administration of justice; reiterates that a public inquiry is the most effective means to get the truth about the scope and extent of state collusion in this murder; urges the British Government, in the public interest, to reconsider their response to the Supreme Court ruling; recognises, on 12 March 2021, the reopening of supervision by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers into the murder of Pat Finucane; further recognises the significance of this unusual step by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, which acknowledged, with profound concern, the delay in ongoing legacy cases generally whilst resuming supervision of measures by the UK Government in order to ensure they are adequate, sufficient and timely; calls on the British Government to establish the Historical Investigations Unit and the other Stormont House Agreement legacy mechanisms so that families of all victims have access to human rights-compliant investigations; and further calls on the British Government to initiate the independent, public inquiry they promised to the family of Pat Finucane in 2001.*

**Mr Speaker:** I thank all Members for their contributions this afternoon. I ask you to take your ease for a moment or two.

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

*Motion made:*

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone).]*

## Adjournment

### Opposition to a Waste Incinerator from the Residents of Hightown, Mallusk and South Antrim

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Dr Steve Aiken to raise the matter of opposition to a waste incinerator from the residents of Hightown, Mallusk and South Antrim. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. I make Members aware that a maximum of one hour is available for the debate.

**Dr Aiken:** Thank you very much indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will endeavour not to use my full 15 minutes. I think that you will be glad to hear me say that.

I will begin the debate on the opposition in my constituency to the proposed Hightown incinerator. At the beginning of the debate, as a declaration of interest, I make clear my opposition to this waste and subsidy scheme. I also make a declaration of interest, in full disclosure, that, in my previous employment with the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, I represented companies that were working on waste incineration schemes in the United Kingdom, Europe and elsewhere. Therefore, I have some detailed information on how properly managed waste energy schemes should work. I also have a broad understanding of their business and economic cases.

I am not against incineration per se as part of waste management and how we deal with the residual plastic cycle. Indeed, it is a matter of some interest to Members that a waste energy plant already exists in Northern Ireland — one that is already making a significant impact on our security of supply issues and on reducing waste going to landfill. That plant in the Belfast harbour estate, with established grid connections and good transportation links, is helping to reduce energy costs to Spirit AeroSystems and is making a cutting-edge business even more competitive. We should all welcome that.

As reported by the BBC, the Full Circle Generation facility at Belfast harbour, along with its sister company, could process up to 80% of our household waste, and, with recycling rates increasing across Northern Ireland, that plant alone could deal with the majority of our household waste. A spokesman for the company said that, if the current recycling rates are maintained, it would, by 2025, even be running out of feedstock from black bin waste as recycling will have been such a success. That level of recycling should be seen as a matter of pride for Northern Ireland. Indeed, we will also have a legally binding requirement to recycle, which will help us get to our target of 65% of waste being recycled by 2035. We are well on track to achieve that requirement or even exceed it.

Bearing in mind that our recycling rates are increasing and that we already have incineration for waste for power, which has the spare capacity to deal with 80% of our black bin waste — potentially more — what could be the economic, environmental or societal case for the Hightown incinerator?

When I was first elected to the House, one of my first meetings was with representatives from Arc21 and its lobbying firm. I said at the time that I was willing to listen and that, as somebody who understood the waste for

power process, I was persuadable. All the arguments around jobs, an incinerator signalling investment opportunities in Northern Ireland infrastructure, the need to secure energy supply and the consequent reduction in landfill were rehearsed by the company and its lobbyists.

There was a strong implication that I should get behind the scheme as it had full support in my council and beyond.

Knowing from my previous experience that the costs of building the plant for a £240 million project would be significant, I thought it appropriate to ask what business case the company proposed. I asked that, because such plants require a considerable subsidy to run. They are not self-financing. They require a fixed long-term energy price, a gate fee per metric ton of waste processed, which has to be lower than any landfill or recycling tax, and a minimum value per tonnage delivered to the plant. If that is not forthcoming, a compensation package has to be available for the operator and the operating authority over the lifetime of the plant to ensure continued viability.

Many Members will be aware that there has been a catalogue of complaints by public authorities across the United Kingdom, in Europe and beyond about the costs of those schemes. The schemes resort to PFIs or novel forms of funding, which have left many public authorities to cross-subsidise the schemes and, in some cases, have led to near-bankruptcy or worse. The stories of the public-good schemes in Copenhagen, Brighton, Baltimore and elsewhere that have gone bad are, unfortunately, the norm, even when the schemes have grid connections, agreed electricity prices and a contract agreement to pay for waste shortfalls.

Curiously, many of those projects' contracts have been limited to 25 years, because that is deemed to be the longest time possible for such an open-ended commitment to be made by ratepayers and regional taxpayers, and, in engineering terms, most power plants will need replacing or major refurbishment after a quarter of a century of operation. However, Arc21 seeks to tie Northern Ireland ratepayers to a contract for 35 years, which will potentially cost about £2 billion at 2020 prices, despite increasing waste recycling rates and environmental standards, and despite the fact that ample incineration capacity is already available. To be fair, a previous DUP Agriculture Minister had written to Arc21 to say that she would ask Executive colleagues to help to supply the delta between subsidy costs if there were a shortfall. That in 2016-17 such open-ended commitments were made, especially after the RHI debacle, which exposed the taxpayer to longer-term, open-ended commitments, should, I suppose, not come as any surprise to the Assembly.

I asked Arc21 what the business case was. I was told that I would be informed once planning approval had been given. I was surprised, to say the least, that a £240 million project did not have even an outline business case before planning approval was sought. Moreover, the company did not have a grid connection. Anyone with even a passing understanding of the Northern Ireland generating capacity auction knows that the market for supply is currently saturated. With new interconnections, increased peaking and demand-led units, unless someone is paid or legislated against to drop out of generating, there is no obvious market for the energy that could come from Hightown, even if the company had a grid connection.



I enquired what Arc21 planned to do about traffic amelioration around the site to reduce the already chronic infrastructure problems around Mallusk and Hightown. Members can imagine my further surprise and concern when I was informed that there were no plans to upgrade the roads from Sandyknowes roundabout as it would add too much to the cost of the project. Bear in mind that it was a £0.25 billion project that was planned to last for at least 35 years. By that stage, the lack of detail and the assumptions behind the company's case astounded me.

None of it makes any sense unless, of course, the project is simply a subsidy-mining effort, akin not only to the RHI debacle but, in fact, to an "RHI2" scheme for which we will all have to pay. I then discovered that my concerns were widely felt throughout the community, and every political party, although not every political representative within those parties, was against the scheme.

I pay tribute to Colin Buick, Charlie Thompson and all of the local community involved in No-ARC21, who took the very courageous decision to challenge Arc21 and the Department for Infrastructure in the courts. Although the odds were stacked against them, they won.

The sorry tale of how their heroic actions for the community have been thwarted by officialdom will no doubt be told by others today.

#### 5.00 pm

Look at the timeline. Planning was applied for in March 2014. In 2015, the then SDLP Minister refused the project. During the interregnum after the Assembly fell in 2017, the Department for Infrastructure permanent secretary decided to approve it. The case was then judicially reviewed in the High Court in 2018, and the Department lost. Despite all of that, in 2019, Arc21 again attempted to achieve planning approval. Now, in 2021, we await due process to be gone through before the Minister, an MLA for our adjacent constituency, makes the decision.

I could say more on the environmental impacts of toxin release, the impact on the visual landscape of a 95-metre-high chimney dominating the Belfast hills, the increase in traffic on totally inadequate roads, the devastating impact on property values or just the purely ludicrous idea of putting a mechanical biological treatment (MBT) plant and energy-from-waste incinerator three quarters of the way up a mountain with no business plan. It is perhaps not coincidental that none of those plants has been approved in the UK over the past five years. I will leave it at that, however.

My questions to the Minister for Infrastructure are these: why are we continuing to inflict this environmental Ponzi scheme on the people of both my constituency and hers? Why are we, as an Assembly, continuing to authorise spending on exorbitant legal costs for a project that, by any proper analysis, is doomed to failure? Those are the key questions. It is well beyond time that the Hightown incinerator project is finally refused and that the people of my constituency and beyond are saved from that monumental and colossal failure.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I know that others from outside the constituency want to speak, but all the constituency MLAs will be called first, in party sequence. Up to five minutes will be allocated to each Member who speaks. If an MLA who is representing the constituency

takes an intervention, that Member will get an extra minute. That is the procedure for this evening.

**Mrs Cameron:** I commend my constituency colleague Dr Aiken on securing the debate. This is a matter on which we agree wholeheartedly; indeed, as the House will hear, there is a collective voice among those elected to this place to represent the people of Mallusk. The debate is very much an opportunity for us to represent the people of that area. It is their view that the waste monster is not needed and not wanted. I want to make that clear. I commend the work of the No-ARC21 campaign group under the capable and determined voice of Colin Buick. The group has very much put the issue on the agenda and expressed opposition in a constructive and coherent way, one that is not about NIMBYism but is based on fact and the overall well-being of our society.

At the core of the issue is need: is the project needed? The answer to that is clear: it is not needed. Thankfully, we now live in a society in which recycling is the done thing. Recycling rates have increased to 55%, with the target of reaching 65% in 2035. I know that that is an issue that the AERA Minister has been keen to drive forward, with renewed focus on promoting recycling. The consequence of that trend is a substantial reduction in landfill. Rates have fallen to just over 20%, with a target of 10% by 2035. We need to use existing facilities, such as those in Belfast harbour, to manage the reducing amount of landfill that we produce. Having excess capacity will serve only to be counterproductive, reducing the onus on society to reuse and recycle. That is the outcome that none of us should desire if we really care about our environment.

This is an outdated project, outdated in the evidence of need and outdated in its very operation. Some of the proposed technology and processes date back to 2008. Things have moved on considerably since then. Arc21 proposes mechanical biological treatment alongside the incinerator, but that is now a process of the past. It represents neither best practice nor value for money.

In any scheme that requires such vast sums of public money, we must be absolutely certain that the benefit justifies the cost. To lumber hard-pressed households with a bill of around £2 billion over 35 years in gate fees to Arc21 to mechanically treat and incinerate their waste offers no such benefit in return. There are so many questions, relating to design, procurement and so on, about how we got to this stage that justifying the furtherance of the project is simply impossible.

The AERA Minister understands many of those points and has expressed his concerns about the proposal. I commend him for not bowing to the extensive campaign to progress the scheme. However, for the people living in the area, we need to bring the whole issue to a conclusion. My message to the AERA Minister and the Infrastructure Minister is to do just that. Refuse that planning proposal and find a new way forward on waste that is fit for 2021 and beyond.

**Mr Kearney:** Éirím i mo sheasamh chun cainte inniu chan mar Aire ach mar Chomhalta tofa don cheantar. I speak not as a Minister but alongside my colleagues as a constituency MLA. I am pleased to address the issue and thank Steve Aiken for securing the debate and putting a spotlight on this egregious issue. Gabhaim buíochas don

Aire féin as ucht a haird a dhíriú ar an ábhar agus as a bheith anseo don díospóireacht tráthnóna.

I want to make three points. First, this is a highly controversial issue in South Antrim and neighbouring North Belfast. Since the outset of the project in 2014, popular opposition has grown. I echo the remarks of Steve Aiken and Pam Cameron by extending my appreciation to the No-ARC21 campaign group, which embarked upon and led a commendable community-led campaign of opposition to the proposal. The overwhelming view of local people is that they do not want the incinerator to be put on to the Belfast hills. That is the feeling of residents in Hollybrook, Mayfield, Alderley, Aylesbury, Blackrock, Dermont and Anna's Grove and of the farming families in the Belfast hills. They all feel the same. Last week, as I engaged with residents on their doorsteps — constituents in the immediate vicinity — the issue was raised. People asked where the incinerator situation was and what the outcome of the issue was going to be.

All of us — residents and I, as a local representative — fear for the health and well-being of the wider community and fear the ramifications that will flow from the proposal if it is approved. Real safety and environmental concerns apply to the impact on the natural ecosystem of the Belfast hills and the natural habitat of the surrounding countryside. It is notable that the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) has recorded significant concerns, including issues pertaining to visual impact. None of those fears has been allayed. Arc21 persists with that agenda. Worse still, seven years on, local people live with uncertainty about the project emerging, literally, in their backyards and back fields.

Secondly, as well as advocating for the interests of my constituents, I too harbour a deeper concern about the driving interests behind the project. It is the largest public-sector procurement project in the history of the region. No independent assessment of the business case has been considered. A lack of transparency has surrounded the procurement process. I am deeply concerned that aggressive commercial interests are driving the proposal, the only outcome of which is to give primacy to private profit over wider public good, with the cost to be carried by local ratepayers.

Finally, all the Sinn Féin MPs, alongside their SDLP and Alliance Party MP colleagues, have written to the Minister, asking to her refuse this application and urging the avoidance of a future costly error. Today, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus a Aire, I make the same request on behalf of my local constituents. Impím ortsa, agus impím ar an Aire éisteacht le glór an phobail áitiúil. Minister, do not bow to the aggressive commercial interests behind this proposal. Listen to the people of South Antrim and North Belfast. Listen to our rural dwellers and the urban population of Hightown and Mallusk. Minister, finish your assessment of this application, alongside your officials, as is appropriate, and then refuse the planning application.

**Mr Blair:** I rise in support of the residents of Hightown and Mallusk and in total opposition to the proposed development of a waste incinerator facility by Arc21 at the site of the Hightown quarry. That is a position that I have held for some years. I will come to the reasons as to why I hold that position shortly, but, before I do, I want to reflect again, because I think that it was mentioned before, that, already, over 5,000 objections have been lodged

against the current planning application. I remind Members that representatives for the area have stood together, politically united, and stood with the residents who are most impacted and concerned by this proposal in order to ensure that it is shown to be unnecessary and unwanted.

We urgently need a review of the current waste management structures in Northern Ireland, including an urgent review of existing residual waste capacity for landfill and incineration. My party has made it clear that we will oppose any new waste management infrastructure proposals prior to such a needed review. The Alliance Party's green new deal that was launched last month highlights the need to radically reduce emissions in waste management. Carbon emissions are a prime driver of climate change, which is why there has been a significant move away from coal-fired energy in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

In Northern Ireland, Kilroot power station is the only EU emissions trading system (EU ETS) electricity generator that continues to use coal as fuel. Kilroot will be converted to a gas-powered station in 2023, which will mean that the use of coal as fuel will be reduced to zero. A move towards energy-generating incinerators would mean producing more CO<sub>2</sub>. That is the reality. Figures for 2019, for example, show that, across the UK, the 48 incinerators emitted a total of 12.6 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub>. In comparison, the dwindling coal sector produced 11.7 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub>. There are serious concerns around the impacts of incineration emissions — concentrations of nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter — and the associated health effects, which include respiratory and cardiovascular conditions. As mentioned before, there are as many issues for DAERA here as there are for the Department for Infrastructure, though I am grateful that the Infrastructure Minister is here with us, and I readily accept that there are probably limitations on what she can say to us at this stage.

In addition to the environmental impact that I mentioned and the associated health implications, I have serious concerns around the cost of the incineration contracts. We have seen reports from England of councils locked into expensive contracts and facing legal challenges when they try to leave those contracts. The Arc21 councils could be tied into contracts for up to 35 years. Estimated gate fees charged to councils would generate revenue streams north of £2.3 billion for the site's private operators. The proposal creates a perverse incentive for the local councils and/or the incinerator operator, which, on the one hand, will have a duty to recycle, but, on the other, must fulfil a contract that they have entered into and have committed to for many years.

In conclusion, I stand in support, as I said, of the residents of South Antrim. I robustly refute the need for an incinerator at the Mallusk site. I thank Dr Steve Aiken for bringing this topic, and I join South Antrim colleagues in paying tribute to those involved in the No-ARC21 opposition campaign, which has been both professional and thorough.

**Mr Clarke:** I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council, way back when this was first mooted, as one of the sponsors of the Arc21 project.

**5.15 pm**

I am taken back to what Declan said, and I agree with him; it has been controversial. No one can take that away. Albeit I am coming with a different opinion on the proposal — I do support it — I agree with what Declan said about its controversial nature. That controversial application has been in the whole government system for too long. There is no doubt about that.

I listened to what Dr Aiken said about business cases. As a way forward and solution for councils, those matters were put in the hands of a single operator at that time. Arc21 came forward with a proposal. At the time, each and every council supported bringing forward that solution, based on the technology, as the way in which to deal with waste. Whilst I accept that it was many years ago, that was the proposal at the time, and it has not changed.

Obviously, personalities change, people get nervous, and so on and so forth. However, they made that decision in the full understanding that location was not part of the consideration; it was based on technology. All of a sudden, today, I am hearing that the technology is outdated, and all those other things. When the decision was made, it was made on the basis that there was a 35-year contract. That is not to take away from what Mr Aiken said about the business case and everything else.

Reference has been made to private operators. I take exception to the proposer of the Adjournment topic, because he cannot say, on the one hand, that the beneficiary is a private company, and then, on the other hand, suggest that we take it to another private company on the Belfast harbour estate, when that has not gone through a procurement process or anything else. To be fair to the current proposal, it has gone through a lengthy process. The company put its money where its mouth was, brought forward a proposal, went through the processes and put in an application.

Much has been made of the court case. The court did not refuse it on the basis of the technology, location or anything else, but on the basis that the permanent secretary did not have the legal power to make that decision. Therefore, when the case was heard in 2018, there could have been a positive outcome that was based on the expert advice of planning officials, environmental officials and everyone else who fed into the planning system.

I have also heard about the residents of Mallusk. Not all the residents of Mallusk are against it; many are in favour. Many are also in fear of the rumoured extension of Cottonmount landfill site. Why, when we have all those other solutions, would we need to extend Cottonmount? In the past few weeks, we have heard in the press of the hundreds of thousands of tons of waste that is, allegedly, being recycled, but is actually being put on a boat and shipped to the other side of the world, to America, to be incinerated. How does that feed into the debate about CO<sub>2</sub>, or does CO<sub>2</sub> only matter when it is in Northern Ireland?

I am sure that Members are aware of residents' concerns about the stench at Mullaghglass landfill site. I would say that, if one went up around that area and canvassed those people, they would prefer to have an incinerator than to continue to smell methane gas and all the other toxins that come off the Mullaghglass site.

I suggest that the Minister makes a decision on the issue, ends that nonsense and gets us a solution. Indeed, the campaigners used another example of why it is not a good idea. A piece of research was done that followed recyclables in bins in the streets of London. These are the so-called recycling people. Where did the trackers track the waste? It was taken to an incinerator. That suggests to me that recycling is a fraud, it is a front, and it does not work. Why, if it is such a strong, valuable commodity, would it have finished at an incinerator as opposed to being recycled as a commodity, or, indeed, going on a boat to Europe? Forty per cent of our recyclables go across the world, where they are being found in hedges, on roads and in incinerators.

I suggest that we are fooling ourselves. There is a degree of protectionism. The incinerator would be in my constituency. I do not like the fact that it would be in my constituency. However, it is a solution to deal with waste rather than shipping it across the world.

I oppose the sentiment of the Adjournment topic.

**Mr G Kelly:** I have listened to the debate closely. I have been involved with and have supported No-ARC21 for some years, and I was at the case that we are talking about. Just because the case centred on whether the permanent secretary had the right to make the decision does not mean that you can extrapolate from that that it could have been passed on other grounds. He took the decision when he should not have, and he took it against massive opposition. There were a number of meetings with him, including with my party, about it.

A lot of what I was going to say has been said, and I thank Steve Aiken for securing the debate.

**Mr Clarke:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr G Kelly:** Go ahead.

**Mr Clarke:** Is the Member suggesting that, if there is strong opposition to something, it should be refused? Would the Member have adopted the same position on Casement Park in Belfast?

**Mr G Kelly:** I am only starting, and that is one of the points that I was going to make. That is not the only reason.

I thank No-ARC21 for learning and for being very forensic about how it went at the issue over that period. I was interested in the points that Steve Aiken made — some maybe from No-ARC21 but also some from his own experience — and how the factual accounts coincided. That is really what I am standing over. No-ARC21 was very forensic. It looked at all the evidence and convinced us, as party members, that this was the way to go, and it did not give up. At the point when anybody else would have given up — for instance, when the decision was made by the permanent secretary — it moved on from that.

This is a bit repetitive, but there have been serious concerns. One of the reasons why I am speaking is that I am from North Belfast and the edge of North Belfast going into South Antrim is the Hightown Road. One side is North Belfast, and the other side is South Antrim. The effects of the incinerator — whether it is to do with transport, roads, toxins in the air or the water supply, with surface water and all of that — apply not just to South Antrim, because you can pass through that; it involves the Belfast basin, and, of course, the first place that you hit there is North Belfast.

It is worth saying that there are cross-party objections to this from representatives of the DUP — notwithstanding yourself, Trevor — and from Sinn Féin, the SDLP, UUP, Alliance and the Greens.

Recycling rates have been increased to 55%. Trevor said that that is a fraud, but saying that recycling and the idea of recycling is a fraud is a big statement to make. The evidence for it has been given time and time again. There are targets that bring it up to 65%, and, as Steve Aiken said, we are well on the way to reaching those. Landfill rates have fallen to just over 20%. That does not mean that there is not still landfill, but the rates are falling, and that is the main point. As Steve Aiken said, when you add in the site on the harbour, you find that it takes up a huge amount of that as well.

When you have overcapacity, you have, first of all, a financial issue where you are not making any money, as was pointed out, and the subsidies get bigger and bigger. People then try to fill that site, so they start looking for other things. You are talking about waste that is going from here, but what about the waste that will be brought here? If we have a capacity of over 300,000 tons per annum and are nowhere near putting that in, we will get the waste from many other places.

**Mr Clarke:** Will the Member give way on that point?

**Mr G Kelly:** I have already let you in, and I am running out of time.

**Mr Clarke:** You will get an extra minute.

**Mr G Kelly:** I do not think so; this is an Adjournment debate. That was a good try.

I thank the Minister for being here, but I accept that there is only a certain amount that she can say. However, she is from North Belfast, so she will not be surprised by what I say. First, we want the Minister to know the facts about the incinerator. We want this to be based on facts about the building of this waste monster, and, when you look at the size of it, you see that it is a monster. We have not even dealt with the visual effects of it. We want her to know the damage that it is causing financially, which has been covered, and environmentally, which will be covered later. There will be health risks to thousands not just in that area, which is the point that I am making; it goes way beyond that area.

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

**Mr G Kelly:** We want you, Minister, to finish the process, as many people have said, as you have to, in the right way, but we also want you to say no.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member who secured a debate on this topic. I assure him and others, particularly Mr Clarke, that opposition to the project exists far beyond their constituency. When I took office as Environment Minister eight years ago, one of the first things to land on my desk was the Arc21 application. I approached it as I approached every application: with an open mind. I listened to arguments for and against, and, ultimately, I decided to refuse it. The refusal reasons cited were the irrefutable impact on local residents, which I will touch on further, and the lack of need. As Members have said, there is, if anything, much less need now. We have seen a huge increase in recycling and a reduction in the amount of

waste being produced. We look at the capacity that exists elsewhere. Members mentioned the Full Circle Generation project at Bombardier. That needs to be maximised. I have had meetings recently with Fiberight, which is an American company that specialises in recycling. It has a very exciting and environmentally friendly project and is very interested in investing here.

We all recall the collapse of the Assembly. It was at that time that the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) decided that, basically, my decision was wrong. However, at that time, the Department did not even defend my decision because the then Minister, Chris Hazzard, had changed the Department's position from one of objection or opposition to one of neutrality. It is important to say that the position did not remain neutral; it became neutral. That enabled an approval to issue in the absence of Ministers.

I pay tribute to the local campaigners. They have been led brilliantly and bravely by Colin Buick and Charlie Thompson, who went to court and had that decision quashed. However, the celebrations have been short-lived, and here we go again, which is bound to have people asking what Arc21 is. It seems to be some sort of juggernaut that cannot or will not be stopped. It just keeps on coming. Councils seem to be petrified about the potential legal and financial ramifications of their withdrawal of support. Parties here that have, or have had, councillors on the board of Arc21 will have seen how hamstrung they are. The community is completely opposed, as are all parties. I sincerely hope that the AERA Minister listens to his MLAs, maybe with the exception of Mr Clarke, rather than his MPs on this issue. My SDLP colleagues Noreen McClelland, Heather Wilson and, going back, Alban Maginness have always sided with the campaigners. We agree with the campaign.

The application — the whole project — is environmentally unsound and economically illogical. I would love to know what the spend to date has been. I would describe it as a vanity project, but it may be a bit more sinister than that. The drive behind it is not to improve the environment; it is about generating cash, not just energy. Members will have received a detailed document that has been provided by No-ARC21. Although I do not have time to go through it verbatim, I will hit the headlines and summarise its concerns: lack of need; odour pollution; a redundant technology mix; health impact; undesirable location; visual impact; traffic impact; a failed procurement process; and a financial disaster in the making.

I commend the Infrastructure Minister for being here today. As the Minister responsible for planning, and the ultimate decision-maker, she will be limited in what she can say, but I am sure that she will give due regard to all information and carefully consider the way forward in light of her statutory duties. I would like to hear from the AERA Minister on the issue. I know that his early utterances on the project were that he was not convinced by the incinerator. I think that he described it as a waste monster. Has he been convinced yet, or can we see who is trying to convince him and how?

As a former Environment Minister, I was responsible for planning —

5.30 pm

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

**Mr Durkan:** — and the environment, and I cannot recall a case for an incinerator being compelling at all then. It will be less so now.

We do not need or want this. Let us get it stopped, but experience tells us that it will require more than a planning refusal —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Time is up.

**Mr Durkan:** — to do that.

**Ms Bailey:** I am well aware that this is an Adjournment debate and I am not a constituency MLA, but, as Mark Durkan said, this issue goes much further. I thank Steve Aiken for securing the debate.

I have only a short time to speak and do not want to go over what has been said already. I agree with what Trevor Clarke said about our recycling figures and where waste ends up. We hear stories of our recycling being shipped off and being washed up on American beaches, for example. No consideration has been given to that.

When we look at recycling, we see that there is a wider message. It is reduce, reuse and recycle, but nowhere in the conversation do we talk about reducing our waste, and that is key. This incinerator will need to be fed constantly, so we could be continually asking people to keep consuming so that we can feed an incinerator that will keep polluting, and that is the answer.

Let us not forget that the incinerator is not part of a waste strategy, because, to the best of my knowledge, Northern Ireland does not even have a waste strategy. That is where the AERA Minister comes in. Northern Ireland has neither a waste strategy nor a clean air strategy, so we are poisoning, and we will put more pollutants into the air while we do not have those strategies.

The Department's figures already tell us that the level of ammonia — it is just one of the pollutants in our air — is a factor in up to 600 premature deaths in Northern Ireland year-on-year. That is just one pollutant, and we have no clean air strategy and no waste strategy. We then look at the planning system. We know that this incinerator has been in the planning system for eight years since a previous Environment Minister, Mark Durkan, said that he received the application on his desk.

What has happened in those eight years? It has been left to people and to residents to mobilise, lobby and take court cases in order to have themselves heard and have the application overturned. This is an issue not only for the Infrastructure Minister but for the AERA Minister. Minister, when you address us, will you let us know what conversations have been had? What has been taken into consideration when looking at the issue? Are we looking at a waste strategy? Are we looking at the "polluter pays" principle?

I receive emails from big fast-food outlets, which I will not name, telling me about their environmental credentials because they pick up the litter that they produce, which will go to an incinerator or be put on a recycling boat to be shipped overseas and washed up on a beach in the United States of America.

The place is a mess. The planning system is a mess. The onus that we put on people to do what we should be doing is a mess. The lack of strategies and legislation is an absolute mess. For all those reasons, the Greens will not support the incinerator until we have a strategy that puts people's health and well-being first.

**Mr Carroll:** Thanks to the Member for securing the debate. I absolutely support the campaign against the Hightown incinerator and Arc21 and for the incinerator not to be developed. I give my support once again to the No-ARC21 campaign, the residents, the environmentalists and everybody who has campaigned against the incinerator for many years.

Many years ago, when I was a councillor, I was on the Arc21 committee. I opposed the incinerator then, as I do now, alongside my councillor colleagues. I return to something that Mr Durkan said. The approach has been to make councillors petrified about a decision. My recollection is that significant pressure was put on me and many other councillors to go along with the decision or there would be massive ramifications for ratepayers and councils. That is not an open or democratic process. That is being strong-armed, to put it kindly.

The issue did not have a direct impact on my constituents, but it did have immediate implications for neighbouring constituencies. As far as I understand it, however, the company has expanded its needs case to include all of the North, so it will directly affect my constituents now, although it is worthwhile and important to be here regardless of that.

It seems to me and to many others that, at a time when recycling, as Members said, is thankfully on the up, it would be not only unwise but potentially environmentally destructive, leading to more emissions, to give the incinerator the go-ahead. Feeding the incinerator and producing waste to keep it functioning will be the order of the day, never mind the fact that, in order to address waste, as Clare Bailey mentioned, we need to tackle the source of the problem, which is production. We need to tackle the economic and political system under which we live, which is addicted to plastic and profit. That is how to stop it being shipped across to America or being burnt. I suspect that Mr Clarke probably does not agree with that approach.

Other people have already touched on the question of the technological mix of the incinerator. It was developed over 15 years ago and is not being built anywhere else in the UK. Parity of esteem, anybody? There are, of course, questions around finance and public money, as Members raised. The ratepayers will have to pay billions of pounds for it for over 30 years. Many people do not even know that Arc21 exists or what it even means. If there are billions for the incinerator, where is the money for green jobs, for home insulation, for reforestation etc? It is, indeed, a waste of money.

Mr Clarke mentioned the Mullaghglass site in my constituency, which is causing massive issues for residents. There are complaints about the odour and nuisance and that it is possibly causing health issues. I repeat that Mr Clarke's Minister should act quickly to shut it down. The site for the Hightown Arc21 incinerator, if it is built on, will be right next to residential properties — it is 1 kilometre away — and will likely have issues similar

to those that we are seeing at Mullaghglass. There are questions around farmland, air-quality impact, disturbance of drinking water and many other issues.

I appreciate that the Minister for Infrastructure may not be able to comment on this, but how absurd would it be if every single party in the House, bar one Member, were opposed to the application but it could still go ahead? That puts a focus on the massive problems and lack of democracy in our planning system. I hope that that is not the situation and that the Minister will deny the application planning permission. It is opposed not only by parties here but by thousands of people right across her constituency and across the North more generally.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I call the Minister for Infrastructure to respond to the debate. She has up to 10 minutes.

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** First, I thank Dr Aiken for securing the debate on opposition to a waste incinerator from the residents of Hightown, Mallusk and South Antrim.

I have listened carefully and with interest to all the comments made and issues raised by Members representing North Belfast, South Antrim and West Belfast, as well as former Environment Minister Mark Durkan and the leader of the Green Party. It is clear that the proposed development at Hightown is an important issue for Members and their constituents.

At the outset, however, I advise Members that, as Mr Blair, Mr Kelly and Mr Durkan rightly pointed out, my participation in and contribution to this debate may be somewhat limited in comparison with what is normally expected. That is because the debate is focused around a live planning application for the proposed incinerator, and I will be the Minister who ultimately takes the decision on the application. As such, in the interests of transparency, and so that no prejudice is caused to any party that is involved in the process by what I say in the Chamber, it would not be appropriate for me to make specific comments on the planning merits or otherwise of the application at this time.

I do, however, understand the frustrations —.

**Dr Aiken:** Thank you very much indeed for giving way, Minister, and for your remarks as well. This is an issue that we have heard a lot about from the Agriculture Minister as well. Could this not be seen as a cross-cutting issue and therefore an issue for the Northern Ireland Executive? Perhaps it is a decision that the Northern Ireland Executive, as well as you, should be pushing for in order to get a speedy resolution to where we are at at the moment?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his intervention. He will be aware of the legislation enacted in this mandate that clarifies the roles, responsibilities and powers that I have as the Minister responsible for planning.

I return to the comments in the debate. I appreciate the frustration that Members have expressed on behalf of their constituents about the length of time that the application has been under process, and I assure them that I am keen to bring a resolution to that long-standing application for all involved. However, as a number of Members rightly identified, if a sound decision is to be reached, it is important that the planning process be completed correctly.

I am very aware of the large number of objections to the planning application and the opposition that exists locally. I fully appreciate the concerns that people have about such development. It is an important aspect of our planning system that everyone can have a say on proposals that may affect them. In considering representations and applications, due process must be followed by my Department.

One of the main issues associated with the proposal, which has been raised by several Members in the past and again here today, is the need for such a facility and whether we should focus on reducing waste and improving recycling rates rather than the incineration of waste. The question of the need for the facility is, as Mark Durkan highlighted, a matter for the applicant and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. In response to the question posed by the Green Party leader, Clare Bailey, I say that my Department has asked DAERA for an update on a statement of need.

Members will know that I have set out my priorities for the remainder of this mandate: to improve lives; to connect communities; to grow a balanced economy; and to tackle the climate emergency. In respect of the last named, I am committed to climate action, and promoting recycling is an important aspect in that regard. As previously mentioned, however, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the particular merits of the planning application.

It is important to me, as Infrastructure Minister, that any planning decision taken is robust and sustainable and that it is taken in an open and transparent manner on its planning merits. That approach applies to this application as it does to any other. I will not come to any conclusions on the processing of the application until I have fully considered the report and the recommendation from my planning officials. It is important that I take an objective view of applications. It is also important that any decision be balanced, fair, impartial and robust in all the processes followed. In the meantime, I assure Members that my officials continue to process the application at pace and in line with the planning policy to a point where a recommendation can be made for my consideration.

*Adjourned at 5.43 pm.*

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 24 May 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Executive Committee Business

### The draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

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

*That the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

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

**Mrs Dodds:** I am seeking the Assembly's approval for this draft order, laid before the Assembly under article 66(2) of the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. My Department makes the order under powers conferred by articles 52 to 55F and 66(3) of the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. It is subject to the draft affirmative procedure and therefore must be approved by a resolution of the Northern Ireland Assembly before it can be made. This is a temporary amendment, lasting for one year, to the Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 and is necessary in order for Northern Ireland to maintain consistency of approach across the UK and to ensure that eligible combined heat and power (CHP) operators in Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged.

The combined heat and power quality assurance programme (CHPQA) is a UK-wide government initiative providing a practical, determinate method for assessing all types and sizes of combined heat and power schemes.

CHPQA aims to monitor, assess and improve the quality of UK combined heat and power. The programme provides the opportunity for CHP schemes to demonstrate that their CHP is good quality in accordance with the criteria of the CHPQA standard.

Successful certification provides eligibility to a range of benefits, such as, for Northern Ireland operators, climate change levy exemption. The programme is administered by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) in consultation with the devolved Administrations and has been in operation across the UK since 2001. In 2019, 41 CHP schemes in Northern Ireland were accredited under the programme. CHP operators expressed concern to BEIS that COVID-19 and the associated nationwide and regional restrictions changed the demands of customers and that that had an adverse impact on heat and power ratios.

The CHPQA programme operates on a calendar year basis, and the concern is that some CHP schemes will be

unable to obtain the required benchmark to qualify as a good-quality CHP for 2020 and, therefore, will be unable to qualify for certification in 2021.

BEIS published a UK-wide consultation on 15 December 2020 seeking views on a temporary proposal to amend the certification process that will allow effective participants who can provide appropriate evidence on the impact of COVID-19 to choose to use the 2019 operational data in place of their disrupted 2020 data for their 2021 certification. The consultation closed on 29 January, and BEIS decided to implement the proposal. The legislation is temporary, lasting for only one year from the date of coming into operation and allowing Northern Ireland's CHP operators to submit 2019 data. Implementation in GB will necessitate a minor legislative amendment to update the CHPQA standard.

The order seeks to maintain a consistency of approach across the UK, and no additional cost to business, charities or voluntary bodies is anticipated.

In advance of today's debate, the proposal was shared with Executive colleagues and the Committee for the Economy. I received no comments reflecting the technical nature of the amendment and, I presume, there was a recognition of the need to maintain consistency of practice across all UK jurisdictions that operate the scheme. The Utility Regulator and the Consumer Council have indicated their support for the amendment.

I seek the Assembly's support for the order to be made.

**Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** I will speak briefly on behalf of the Committee for the Economy to support the motion.

As the Minister indicated, the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (NI) 2021 will ensure that certification for combined heat and power quality assurance schemes is not adversely impacted by COVID and allows for the changed demands of customers and the impact on heat and power ratios.

BEIS is implementing a minor legislative amendment to update the combined heat and power quality assurance standard by allowing operators to submit 2019 data. In order to maintain consistency of approach, a similar amendment to the Renewables Obligation Order (NI) 2009 is required, which will ensure that eligible operators here are not disadvantaged.

The Committee agreed the statutory rule (SR) at its meeting on 28 April 2021, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules. The rule will come into operation on 1 June. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has

no issue with the rule, and I support the motion to confirm on the Committee's behalf.

I also support the motion as the economy spokesperson of Sinn Féin. The consequences of the pandemic are far-reaching and, in some ways, unforeseen. The SR could seem quite niche and technical. It allows the previous year's data to be used to certify CHP quality assurance schemes. It is temporary, but, as with other such SRs, we have acted to mitigate and limit the negative impacts of the pandemic and, therefore, are happy to support the motion.

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Minister to make a winding-up speech and conclude the debate.

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Chair of the Committee and, indeed, the whole Committee for their support of the SR. It is important that we help those who have suffered during the pandemic. The SR is temporary, and it will help to alleviate some concern and ensure nationwide consistency for the accreditation.

Thank you for your support, and I thank the Assembly for allowing the SR to proceed.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.*

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

## Committee Business

### Climate Change Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

**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 Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

**Mr McGuigan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I beg to move

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 17 December 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Climate Change Bill [NIA Bill 19/17-22].*

For accuracy, I should point out that I, as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, am standing in for the Chair. The Chair is unable to be with us.

**Mr Speaker:** Pardon me for elevating you. Sorry. Go ahead.

**Mr McGuigan:** Go raibh maith agat. The private Member's Climate Change Bill, which passed Second Stage on 10 May 2021, has been referred to the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee for scrutiny. The Bill proposes a framework to mitigate the negative effects of climate change and sets out a series of measures to enable our society to achieve a net zero greenhouse gas emissions target by 2045.

The Committee recognises the profound impact that climate change has on our environment and understands that the Bill could have profound implications for many sectors of the economy, including farming, agri-food, energy production and transport. Therefore, the Committee, to ensure that it has sufficient time to gather views and evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, has tabled a motion to extend Committee Stage until 17 December 2021.

The Committee launched its call for evidence on Thursday 20 May 2021. That will last for eight weeks, and it is using the Citizen Space platform to collate written evidence from interested stakeholders and members of the public. The Committee has also organised oral briefing sessions with organisations in the agri-food, environment and energy sectors. Given the wide-ranging scope of the Bill, it is important that the Committee has enough time to consider the views of all those who will be affected so that it can ensure that the Bill delivers an effective, collaborative and sustainable model to mitigate climate change, which will impact not only on how we currently live and work but on future generations.

**Mr Speaker:** No other Members have indicated that they want to speak on the matter.

*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 17 December 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Climate Change Bill [NIA Bill 19/17-22].*

**Mr Speaker:** I ask Members to take their ease for a moment, please.



12.15 pm

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

## **Restrictive Intervention and Seclusion of Children and Young People with Additional Support Needs**

**Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education):** I beg to move

*That this Assembly expresses concern at the lack of statutory guidance from the Department of Education on the use of restrictive intervention on children and young people, particularly those who have additional support needs, including those with physical or learning disabilities or who are neurodivergent; calls on the Minister of Education to develop and introduce, in partnership with teachers, parents and all other relevant stakeholders, up-to-date statutory guidance on therapeutic-based, non-aversive, positive behaviour strategies; and further calls on the Minister to fund mandatory training on this approach for all staff working directly with children and young people, provide statutory guidance on restraint definitions, last-resort definitions, and human rights-based guidance in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), introduce mandatory recording and reporting of all incidents of restrictive intervention and abolish the use of isolation rooms.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr Lyttle:** Some people say that emotion can be an enemy of good oratory, and I am going to wrestle with that enemy today. As Chairperson of the Education Committee, I have advocated for the outstanding teachers, non-teaching staff and schools across Northern Ireland, particularly our outstanding special schools, at times when they felt that the Education Minister did not do so. However, in the absence of appropriate Department of Education guidance, accountability and support on restraint, serious mistakes have been made by schools, boards of governors and employing authorities such as the Education Authority (EA) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), which have caused significant harm to the children whom they were entrusted to protect.

The motion is for the children who have been harmed by the inappropriate use of restraint and seclusion in Northern Ireland. It is for the parents and guardians who have experienced distress and trauma because of the harm that their children suffered. It is for parents, guardians and, on many occasions, mothers who were not believed, who risked their reputation, mental health and well-being to challenge people of standing in their local community to hold child protection failings of respected institutions to account, who became experts in law and policy and who refused to give up.

It is for children such as Harry Shakespeare and parents and guardians such as Deirdre and Rodney Shakespeare, whom I first met in July 2019 when they were lobbying for a Harry's law to include many of the recommendations that

are set out in our motion. That family asked me to read out a short comment from them today. The Shakespeares say:

*"It is difficult to describe the pain and heartache at knowing our child was restrained and frightened, that we didn't know and we couldn't stop it. This has left our family feeling vulnerable and alone, in pain and unsupported. All we ever wanted for Harry was acknowledgement of the harm done and accountability from those responsible for keeping him safe.*

*Please use your voices in this chamber today and support a Harry's Law to ensure no other family experiences this pain."*

The motion is for families such as the Shakespeares and for all children and parents who have suffered similar harm from inappropriate restraint and seclusion, be that physical or mechanical restraint. We have heard harrowing accounts of children who have been told to sit, surrounded by cardboard boxes — a measure that supposedly helps with concentration — and of children who have been secluded in so-called isolation rooms that are no bigger than 8 feet by 4 feet in diameter. The findings of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) investigation into inappropriate restraint and seclusion are harrowing, and Margaret Kelly and her team's recommendations are consistent with those in the motion that I present on behalf of the Education Committee.

I first drafted the motion in July 2020. It is based on work with the British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI), all political parties and a wide range of people and organisations, such as the Children's Commissioner, the International Coalition Against Restraint and Seclusion (ICARS), Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland (PABSS) and Parent Action, to name but a few. The recommendations in the motion are clear: a requirement for the Department of Education to provide statutory guidance on restraint that is based on therapeutic, non-aversive, positive behaviour approaches, with restraint as a last resort; definitions of restraint that are based on the UNCRC; funded mandatory training for all staff working with children; the mandatory recording and reporting of all incidents of restraint; and the abolition of the use of isolation rooms.

In 2019, the British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland released a policy statement expressing concern at the lack of standardised guidance from the Department of Education on restraint and seclusion. That statement coincided with a number of high-profile reports that revealed inappropriate restraint and seclusion and unmonitored practices in schools across the UK. As a result of those reports and sustained campaigning from charities and parent groups, the UK Government introduced a new framework in 2019 that was aimed at reducing reliance on restraint and seclusion in educational settings. The Education Committee has taken harrowing evidence and testimony from parents of children who have experienced the use of inappropriate restraint and seclusion. We must make sure that no other children suffer as they did. The Committee noted with concern that the current guidance is over 20 years old and has not been updated to reflect children's rights protections and best practices adopted in other jurisdictions. The Committee remains concerned at gaps in the interim guidance,

particularly that it does not adequately address the use of seclusion or particular types of restraint.

The Committee believes that new guidance should be focused on best-practice approaches on the needs of the pupil and that their rights should be enshrined in the UNCRC to give equal access to education for all children, including those with disabilities. Social and communication conditions can present in different ways, and they can be misunderstood as misbehaviour. It is important to be clear that we do not underestimate the difficulty of some situations for teachers, non-teaching staff and parents. We need teachers to have clear support from the Department of Education and to be equipped with all available skills and understanding of techniques to ensure that they respond in the best interests of the child.

That is a challenge that is exacerbated by the huge pressure on special educational needs (SEN) provision in Northern Ireland, and it is a challenge to which the Department of Education must respond.

The Committee has argued strongly for guidance to be produced in partnership with parents and relevant stakeholders and is encouraged by the Department of Education's inclusion of parent advocates and carers in its review process, as well as by recent updates that we have received on the progress of the established working group.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyttle:** I will give way briefly.

**Mr Allister:** I heard the Member make fleeting reference to the situation with teachers. What is a teacher meant to do when a child is totally out of control? I saw that happen once, when I was chairman of a board of governors. I was in the school one morning and, from the noise, I could hear that a child was totally out of control. I looked into the classroom, and that child was utterly out of control. There was total disruption and violence. What was the teacher meant to do? Talking had failed. The class was being entirely disrupted. The parent could not deal with the situation. I read much in the motion about guaranteeing the rights of the child: that is good and fine, but what is the teacher meant to do? We cannot just say, "Apply UN this and that"; we need to be real.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Member for his intervention. The recommendations in the motion go to the heart of ensuring that teachers are equipped to respond to that situation and ensure that there is no harm to the child or to anyone in the vicinity of the child.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that a key to resolving the issue is to ensure that staff in schools are properly trained and receive full access to that training and, indeed, that there is the necessary funding to ensure that there is support for children who are distressed?

**Mr Lyttle:** Absolutely. It is extremely rare that a child will be in that level of distress without it being an expression of communication. We have to equip all our professionals who work in those situations with the skills to respond to that.

I am almost out of time. The substance of today's Education Committee motion presents the Assembly and the Education Minister with an opportunity to be grasped to ensure that we protect all children from inappropriate

restraint and seclusion. I sincerely look forward to other MLAs' contributions and the Education Minister's response and to ensuring that we progress the statutory guidance and legislation that is needed to move us forward on the matter.

**Mr Newton:** I support the motion. In every motion that comes before the Assembly, you look to see what the key phrases or words are. The subject of this motion has united the Committee since we returned after our three-year break. Representation was made to the Committee from the special needs schools principals' leadership group. The Committee started to look into the many areas that were giving concern to special needs schools, teachers and support staff. The Committee has unanimously supported the work that is eventually rolling out to address special needs. As I said, it is a matter that has united the Committee. We used these key words in forming the motion:

*"the use of restrictive intervention on children and young people, particularly those who have additional support needs".*

As was already referred to, we had an informal meeting with the mother of one young man, Deirdre Shakespeare, and her son, Harry.

Indeed, there were indications from the parent that that young man, who had changed schools, had endured some difficult situations in the school. You would have had a heart of stone if you had not felt for the parent in those circumstances.

### 12.30 pm

The motion also asks for:

*"mandatory training on this approach for all staff working directly with children".*

I am pleased to say that I believe that the Minister is listening to those kinds of words in considering how the matter can be fully addressed. It is a difficult matter, but the Committee has addressed it and concentrated some of its work on it. There is no doubt that difficult situations arise, and there is no doubt that we need to empower teachers and increase their skills. That should be done; it should not even have to be considered. There should be continuing professional development throughout a teacher's life, and, indeed, as that teaching career develops, they should have the opportunity to pick up on training. Given that they are difficult situations, it should be accredited training, and it should gear us towards international best practice. There is no doubt that we have a highly skilled teaching labour force and highly skilled support staff, and we have a career interest and a dedication among our teaching staff that may not be found in some other professions. I talked about the young man who moved school, and there needs to be a constructive ongoing relationship between the parents, the teachers and the school; indeed, that may well be helpful as the years of schooling run through.

Mr Allister referred to a particular incident; indeed, it is about how those incidents are responded to and about ensuring that, whenever an incident happens in a school, there is communication between the school and the parents so that there is a record of that. Hopefully, more professional advice can be offered in those situations. Ms

Shakespeare talked to members of the Committee about the ability to physically handle a child. Her son Harry was a non-verbal pupil who had complex issues, and some of the actions that were carried out in his first school may well have made the situation even worse for Harry.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is picking up on the issues and is and has been listening to the words of the Committee on the issue and on special educational needs issues in general.

**Ms Brogan:** First, I would like to respond to Mr Allister's intervention on the Chair of the Education Committee. Mr Allister asked what a teacher should do in those circumstances: if he had read or listened to the accounts of the likes of Deirdre Shakespeare and heard about what her son has suffered, he would know that the last thing that helps in those situations is physically or mechanically restraining or secluding the child.

At the outset, I thank the parents and advocacy groups that have worked so incredibly hard and shown such determination. They have been encouraged, first, to raise awareness of the issue of restraint and seclusion in schools and then to work towards policy change. I have the utmost respect and admiration for all the parents and groups involved in this, and there are a number who have been involved in the campaign.

I want to pay particular attention to Deirdre Shakespeare and Beth Morrison. They are the co-founders of ICARS, which is the International Coalition Against Restraint and Seclusion. Deirdre and Beth addressed the Education Committee a number of weeks ago and eloquently told the stories of their sons, Harry and Callum. Listening to Harry and Callum's stories, I had tears in my eyes. It was hard to listen to them. At one point, I wanted to mute the computer; it was like watching a scary film where you want to put your fingers in your ears and close your eyes because you cannot listen any more. At times, I had to catch myself on because those children had suffered that treatment and the parents had to relive it time and again to try to get some sort of change, so the least that I could do was to listen and to try to be a voice for Harry, Callum, the parents and any other child who had suffered such cruel, restrictive practices and those who are vulnerable to it in the future. I commend and thank Deirdre and Beth. It is worth saying that those children have suffered cruel, restrictive practices previously, but they are recovering now and are safe. It is also worth noting that the families are still working hard and fighting so that other children and families do not have to go through the same heartache. I commend them for that as well.

We have received information and reports from the Children's Commissioner, from NIPSO and from the Association of Social Workers in the North. We have also heard evidence from a wide range of stakeholders and advocacy groups, as mentioned. The reports highlight a number of recurring themes about restraint and seclusion in schools, but one issue that jumps out for me is that there is no mandatory duty to record or report an incident of restraint and seclusion. That means that we have no way of knowing how widespread the issue is across our schools and that no one is held accountable for those wrongdoings to our children. The NIPSO report, published today, tells us that NIPSO is currently dealing with 20 complaints or enquiries. However, that is only the tip of the iceberg; it does not reflect the true rates of incidence.

The following testimony that I received from a carer who worked in a pre-school setting might explain why some are reluctant to come forward with their concerns. This is her account:

*"The restraining of children came in the form of strapping them into a high chair and turning them away from their peers. This restraint was used as a punishment for a child misbehaving or having a tantrum. The child would be visibly upset and crying when being strapped in. When the child was calm, they would still have been left staring out the window until it was deemed fit to release them."*

The childcare worker goes on to say:

*"The very fact that parents did not know that this practice was taking place made it wrong."*

That childcare worker reported the use of restraint but lost her job as a consequence. She left, hoping that her actions led to the ending of the practice of restraint in that particular setting, but, like us, she does not know.

Without a mandatory duty to record, monitor and review incidents, not only do we, NIPSO, the Children's Commissioner nor any of the advocacy groups that we have mentioned not know the full figures, neither do the parents. That is wholly unacceptable in all cases, but with pre-verbal or non-verbal children, it is horrifying. No parent leaves their child in childcare, nursery school or school and thinks, "We will not know what happens to them today". A parent leaves their child, trusting an entire team of staff to act in the best interests of the child.

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

**Ms Brogan:** Parents want their child to feel safe, loved and supported in that setting.

I support the call, in this motion, for mandatory reporting and recording of the use of restraint.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Minister for being here to listen to and respond to the debate.

The motion is brought by the Committee for Education following evidence gathered from organisations such as Parent Action, the Children's Law Centre, Autism NI, ICARS, PABSS and others. There has been a concerted campaign on the issue, and I am especially aware of Deirdre and Rodney Shakespeare — the Chair referred to them — who are from Strabane and whose son is Harry. They have been advocating a Harry's law to be implemented here. I thank them and other organisations that have engaged with the Committee and the SDLP on this issue. I also want to mention Shaunagh Kane, who has been very good at keeping me aware of some of the very serious issues and challenges that exist in SEN.

All those organisations have raised considerable concerns about the use of restraint and seclusion across schools in the North and about how our laws and guidance on them have been massively lagging behind, especially given developments in medical research and reviews that have been instigated in other parts of the UK.

There have been widespread calls for reform, including from the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner. This morning, we heard comments from Margaret Kelly of the

Office of the NI Public Services Ombudsman, who also called for reform. Those voices compound the need for reform and have added to other calls, even from Paris Hilton in recent weeks, for immediate intervention on regulation of the practice.

The law governing the use of restraint in schools is 23 years old, while guidance on seclusion does not even define what it is. Therefore, it is an open book, a free run and self-defining; it is defined by the school. England, Scotland and Wales reviewed and updated their guidance in line with the current medical evidence, which has advanced significantly over the past two decades. The SDLP believes that Northern Ireland needs to do the same immediately.

The recent evidence sessions at the Education Committee brought a very real-life, human element to the discussion. We are talking about children: children who are often in a very distressed state, who are trying to communicate and who cannot quite communicate the way that others can and, as a result of not getting their message across, become quite distressed. That creates some issues in the classroom, but it must be recognised that those children need support.

I speak as an uncle of a child of six years of age. His name is Ashton. I have been seeing, since he was very young, the meltdowns, the temper tantrums and the sheer frustration in that child when he cannot communicate the way that he wants. Now, he often just takes you by the hand. If you refuse to go, you will see the temper tantrum quite quickly.

The law governing the use of restraint in schools is, as I said, 23 years old. It needs to change. I want to ensure that today's debate is no way reflective of the many excellent special needs schools across the North. I am fortunate to have two in my constituency. They and their staff do amazing work to support so many of our young people.

The motion concerns resources, training and support, which simply have not been in place on the issues surrounding restraint and seclusion. Challenging behaviour is often cited as the reason why restraint or seclusion is needed in schools. Recent medical evidence suggests, however, that challenging behaviour among children with severe disabilities is, as already stated, a means of communication.

England reacted to that by recently updating its guidance to say that schools should have preventative therapeutic models, including positive behavioural support (PBS) strategies, with restraint and seclusion being used only as a last resort. Given that recent development in England, it is therefore concerning that we continue to rely on legislation and guidance that are over two decades old when so much has changed and, in the present day, there is so much more awareness.

It is very concerning that there is little to no data on recording incidents of restraint and seclusion in our schools. It came up in Committee that we do not know the extent of their use, and there is no central database that collates information on incidents, nor is information routinely shared with families. That needs to change. I know that the Minister will recognise that there should probably be a record of that so that we can have a wider understanding of where things are.

I will bring my remarks to a conclusion. The SDLP believes that there is an urgent need for Northern Ireland to catch up on how restraint and seclusion are used in our schools. We need reform, and we need it now. On that basis, I support the motion, and I thank Members for their contributions.

**Mr Butler:** As the education spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party, I am delighted to support the motion, which was tabled by the Education Committee to call on the Minister of Education to urgently develop new up-to-date guidance on restraint and seclusion. I am somewhat saddened that, in 2021, with all that we know about children and their development, we still have to talk about change.

As a parent of over 20 years, and, perhaps more significantly, a foster parent with over 15 years' service, I have some experience of children who, at times, display behaviour that is challenging and difficult to deal with. I will not diminish or sugar-coat the effort that it sometimes takes to de-escalate or normalise the behaviour of the child at that point.

However, I cannot be clearer in saying that not once did the time spent or the positive behaviour interventions approach fail to work or, more importantly, fail that child.

#### 12.45 pm

It is important to recognise the fantastic work that is done day and daily in schools across Northern Ireland with regard to the education, care and safety of our children. Working in some of those settings can, at times, be the most rewarding and challenging of vocations. In special settings, that work can be even more challenging, due to increased communication difficulties for those pupils. My daughter, who is a third-year Queen's University learning and disability student nurse, often finishes a shift tired, challenged and having learned something new but always committed to understanding the individual better and to reinforcing positive behaviours and that messaging.

It is only right that we pay tribute, as a number of Members have, to the parental champions who have shared with us their personal testimony of how the system, at times, failed to care for and respect their child. Parents like Rodney and Deirdre Shakespeare, amongst others whom we will not name today, have bared their souls to us. At times, many of us, including the Member across the Chamber and me, were reduced to tears as parents shared the moments that they and their children had suffered and the pain that those moments had caused them as a family. Those parents have brought us to where we are today. Well done to them.

The real-life stories, whilst hard to hear — parents talk about mechanical restraint and about isolation or seclusion rooms with no windows, carpet, ventilation, toilet access, water or direct supervision — are, in fact, even harder to read out. For me, the biggest failure is the lack of a requirement to inform parents that these things happened.

Today's motion does not seek to remove the ability for a teacher or qualified support staff member to restrain a child appropriately and safely when absolutely necessary for their own safety or the safety of others; rather, it seeks to address a dreadful imbalance. Good practice should be our minimum benchmark, practice based on positive behaviour should be the norm, and we should build on understanding and communicating with those children as a

priority. We must never fail our children in the future in the way that we have failed them in the past. We support the motion.

**Mr M Bradley:** I note that there is broad agreement amongst all parties in the Chamber and all members of the Committee for Education. I also note that the British Association of Social Workers in Northern Ireland has raised several concerns about the current practices around restriction and seclusion, including the lack of standardised policies and guidance from the Department of Education on the use of restrictive practices and seclusion involving children and young people with additional needs, including those with physical or learning disabilities. The physical, psychological and emotional effects that restraint and seclusion can have on children and young people, their classmates and their families cannot be quantified. The association also suggests a need for mandatory training for all staff who work directly with children and young people with additional needs and opposes the use of seclusion or the isolation from others of a child or young person in a room or other area that they are prevented from leaving.

The existing guidance has remained unchanged since 1999. It needs to be updated urgently as it is no longer relevant. Although temporary guidance has now been provided to schools, recommending that every use of restraint should be recorded and noting that reasonable force restraint should be used only as a measure of last resort and never as a form of punishment, what can be learned from other jurisdictions? Are there lessons to be learned from England, Scotland or Wales? Training and guidance are important, and staff need to have access to regular and up-to-date guidance and training on restraint and seclusion so that they are well informed about how to deal with a wide range of scenarios. It is key not to pass judgement unfairly on staff in our schools. I am in no way attributing blame. We are lucky to have such excellent staff, as evidenced throughout the entire pandemic. There should also be guidance for members of boards of governors, many of whom are not from an education background but from other fields of expertise.

Any use of seclusion or restraint must be recorded centrally. Moving forward, if that means changes to legislation to ensure that recording is mandatory, so be it. Parents must also be contacted after an incident of seclusion or restraint. It is stressful not only for the child but for parents, staff and other pupils. It has been a failure not to record any and all uses of restrictive practices and for parents not to have been informed or engaged with. Any incident in which a decision is made to intervene physically must be recorded and monitored.

The Department of Education has advised that it is setting up a working group, with part of its remit being to review current legislation, policies, guidance, training and audits and current recording, monitoring and follow-up processes. No child should ever be placed in a room unaccompanied and must be free to leave when they want to leave. Any use of that type of seclusion should cease immediately. We must learn lessons from the past and ensure that no child feels isolated or secluded in future. It is our duty to ensure that that happens. The Education Committee is united in its concerns and its desire to see change and reform.

**Mr McNulty:** As a member of the Education Committee, I wholeheartedly endorse the motion. I applaud the bravery, fortitude and determination of people like Deirdre Shakespeare. It was heart-wrenching to sit in the Education Committee and hear her story about Harry and the stories of other parents. I also thank Shauna Kane for her input on this important issue.

Seclusion or restraint is no way in which to treat a child, whether they have special educational needs, learning difficulty, physical disability or behavioural challenges. Seclusion is exclusion. Restraint is cruel. Our children deserve better. A learning disability is not a disease: it is a disability, and we cannot and should not accept any form of seclusion, exclusion or restraint, by whatever means, in the care, education or treatment of a child.

Our society has a shameful record in its treatment of children with additional needs or challenging behaviours. For many years, children with additional needs were locked away, be that in the home or in an institution. They were hidden from the world and seen and treated as a burden on the education system and on society. That was horrendously wrong. In recent decades, we have seen welcome change in the way in which we care for, support and educate children with additional needs. We are rightly moving towards a place where we encourage and value their important and invaluable contribution to society and life.

Many of those children now attend mainstream schools. They engage in training programmes and enjoy the world of work. I know of many examples in my constituency: groups like the Appleby Trust, incredABLE, Support and Training to Realise Individual Development and Employment (STRIDE), Mencap and many others. The young people on those schemes did not become their confident, bubbly, engaging and hard-working selves by being told to sit in the corner or in a room away from their friends and being medically, physically or mechanically restrained. Those young people became the wonderful individuals they are by being cared for, supported, encouraged and cherished as important members of our society.

In recent decades, much of the support and care for those with special educational needs, additional needs or learning disabilities has changed for the better. However, we have a long way to go to get anywhere near where it should be or needs to be. Last week, I had the honour of hosting on Zoom a successful public meeting on special educational needs. We heard from the Children's Commissioner, the mental health champion and the Children's Law Centre. The women from whom we heard were impressive advocates for children and do really important work.

We also heard heartbreaking stories from the families of those with disabilities about their struggles with the education and health systems as they seek the support that their children need and deserve and to which they are legally entitled. There needs to be greater investment in services for children with additional needs and more comprehensive short-break respite services for the families of children and, indeed, adults with complex needs. There needs to be more support for children in schools and more post-19 support services.

We need to outlaw the cruel practice of restraint in education or healthcare settings and the practice of excluding or secluding a child. There needs to be greater

support and guidance. The Department of Education must urgently provide up-to-state statutory guidance on therapeutically based, non-aversive, positive behaviour strategies. We need mandatory training in those for all staff working directly with children and young people. Any restraint must be human rights-compliant, and any instance in which it is used must be documented and recorded by law.

All that we ask is that someone with a disability or challenging behaviour be treated with gentle care, dignity and respect and treated as important members of our society.

**Mr Humphrey:** As Members have said, the Education Committee has spent considerable time discussing the issues, and we have met on a number of occasions the special schools' principals' group, which has always been very beneficial to those of us involved in education. I declare an interest as a governor in two schools.

I begin by commending our excellent staff in our special needs schools across Northern Ireland. They are extremely professional and dedicated in carrying out their job.

Recently, my colleagues and I met Deirdre Shakespeare, whom other Members have mentioned. She is Harry's mum, and she gave us very moving yet disturbing evidence about the problems that her son faced that rippled across her family and evidence about the detrimental effect that those problems had on the family and on that young man in particular.

It is my understanding that the Department is carrying out a review of the use of restraint and seclusion in education and that the report is due to be completed in March 2022. An acceptance that the existing guidance is out of date is important, and the Department and the Minister have accepted that. The regulations clearly need to be updated, although I understand that there is temporary guidance in place that provides advice on recording of the use of restraint.

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** I thank the Member for giving way. Each year, we produce an internal action plan that covers the period from April to March. I hope to see a situation in which that plan can be produced by way of a review and finalised considerably earlier than March 2022, which is the latest date.

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

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for that helpful clarification. The House will welcome that information from him.

As others have said, it is important to draw on the experience of jurisdictions across the United Kingdom and Europe to see how the situation can be improved for our young people. I welcome the fact that the Department of Education has established a reference group and that a working group is now considering how the issue has been dealt with, progressed and put into practice in neighbouring jurisdictions. Advocates of change have recognised that the non-statutory guidance on restraint and seclusion would be a welcome step, and the Minister is responding to that positively.

As I have said, I commend our staff. I have seen at first hand how staff across our education estate work, particularly in special needs settings. They are exemplary public servants and should be regarded and respected by us all. It is absolutely critical, however, that the views of teaching and support staff, young people and their parents and carers be central to any recommendations that come forward. Consultation is key to finding a workable solution. Training and up-to-date guidance is critical for staff, because, as I said, those people have a hugely difficult job. At times, they do it in very challenging circumstances and are on the receiving end of abuse. The recording of incidents therefore needs to be mandatory. That is a protection not just for the young people but for staff.

We must move to protect our children and young people in the classroom. I commend the Minister and the Department for the ongoing work. I welcome the fact that we may well get to a point at which we will have something positive and tangible for the classroom and for the benefit of our young people before March 2022. That is welcome news, but we must provide training and guidance in all things to support and protect our staff. We must protect the young people in the classroom and those who work with and protect those young people daily. It is absolutely key to get the balance right in the classroom between protecting young people and protecting the staff who work with them.

**1.00 pm**

**Ms Bradshaw:** I support the motion and thank the Education Committee for bringing it to the Chamber today. I will make my remarks along the lines of human rights and, in particular, health issues. I will focus on the latter, given that human rights are mentioned directly in the motion, but it is worth emphasising the need to respond proactively in policy and legislation to the concluding observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child about the use of restraint and seclusion on children with psychosocial disabilities and, more generally, on the issues arising regarding the mental health and well-being of children and young people. I commend the work of the Children's Commissioner and her office in continuing to draw attention to that. She also raises the basic but important point that we do not know the scale of the problem with restraint and seclusion because of the inconsistency of approach and the failure to update policy and legislation, including around reporting.

On overall policy, as so often, we lag behind the rest of the UK. However, there is a real opportunity for the Education Authority to get this right, as I gather that it is reviewing its therapeutic approach. Regional roll-out could be a once-in-a-generation chance. The value of getting it right should be clearly stated: it would mean that children receive the highest standards of appropriate care and support from all the adults in their lives. When we state it in that way, we can see that it is not a matter for just the Education Authority or, indeed, Education but that there is a clear health aspect. We want all children to experience the same therapeutic interventions consistently across all sectors. That means having a commonality of approach between the Education Authority, health trusts and other agencies. Clearly, therefore, joint delivery between both Departments is required.

We have heard about some of the risks of the current scenario continuing. Fundamentally, the issue is that

children may receive divergent levels of care in education and health settings, as staff are not necessarily equipped to deal with multiple and complex needs and reporting mechanisms may be unclear. It is small wonder that we have had multiple court actions. However, the main issue is that children lack a consistent approach on which they can rely, particularly in times of distress. That is the impact of getting it wrong. As it stands, the lack of consistency means that schools use Team Teach, but some may lack training or registered practitioners. On top of that, health trusts use therapeutic crisis intervention methods instead. That leads to inconsistency where we need consistency. Children need to experience the same language, care and support as often as possible and most certainly in times of difficulty. When they are emotionally flooding through distressing and challenging episodes, any difference in approach or even in the training of those delivering that approach is troubling and inadequate. For staff, too, there would be considerable gain from having a consistent approach. Therefore, mandatory training is essential.

Where training is often represented as an add-on, it would, in this case, be the cornerstone of an assurance to staff that they are working within agreed guidelines and frameworks when facing extremely challenging situations. That would provide the added benefit of their knowing that, by following established guidelines, practices and procedures, they will be indemnified against any potential litigation. For that reason, I am strongly supportive of the British Association of Social Workers' call for statutory guidance, which is long overdue. However, I emphasise that that needs to be agreed by the Department of Education and the Department of Health. I strongly share the association's belief that mandatory training should be required for any staff working directly with children and young people with additional needs, including with reference to rights and obligations under the Mental Capacity Act. I therefore join the association in urging collaboration between the Education Authority and social workers in inputting into guidance and conducting appropriate investigations.

There is a moment of real opportunity, as my colleague Chris Lyttle mentioned, to get this right at a time when it will be of huge benefit to children and young people with additional needs and any staff working with them directly. Let us waste no time in doing so.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Committee members for tabling the motion. I, like others, have been contacted by families and parents affected by this. I thank them for their determination to be heard. The motion may not have been on the agenda today without the continued lobbying and raising of the issue with MLAs by a few key parents out there. Listening to those parents, it breaks your heart to hear what has happened to their children and how it has impacted on them as a family.

There are key asks in the motion. They will require, at the outset, resourcing, working together and consistency of approach, as other Members have mentioned. We need to recognise that there are difficulties with definitions. Some parents and carers will not be aware of what was happening to their child or that it was something that could happen. We all need to look at that.

There needs to be a clear way in which parents can raise issues. Coupled with that, there must be data collection. The British Association of Social Workers has stated that

it supports records of cases being shared with parents and guardians or with the young people involved, as well as with the school board, the Department of Education, the EA and the Children's Commissioner. I would certainly support that.

There must be clear avenues of communication, understood by everybody involved. I hope that the Minister and Department can implement those as a matter of urgency. We need to have a standardised policy in order to safeguard our children and young people. I note the NIPSO report published today, in which the ombudsman states:

*"I am extremely concerned by the lack of acknowledgement and standardised policy in regard to the use of seclusion in schools in Northern Ireland ... in the absence of defining seclusion, and having a clear policy outlining what is and what is not permitted, the risk to the child is elevated further."*

We must collect data and ensure that reporting mechanisms are in place and are understood. Whilst there will always be the hidden impacts that are not known about — granted that will always happen — we need the resources too to make sure that every relevant staff member is adequately trained.

They are not new recommendations, as we have heard. In 2016, the UNCRC expressed its concern about the use of restraint and seclusion on children with psychosocial disabilities, including children with autism, in schools. The committee urged the UK to abolish restraint for disciplinary purposes and to ensure that it was used exclusively to prevent harm to the child or others and only as a last resort. It urged the abolition of isolation rooms and recommended that the state should:

*"Systematically and regularly collect and publish disaggregated data on the use of restraint and other restrictive interventions on children in order to monitor the appropriateness of discipline and behaviour management for children in all settings, including in education".*

It has also been raised by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), NIPSO, the British Association of Social Workers, parents, carers, politicians and so many others, so we do not need any more reports and recommendations. The Minister and Department, in conjunction with those involved — the parents, carers, children and young people themselves, the schools, teachers, unions and organisations — need to introduce mandatory training, data collection and reporting and to have a clear and well understood policy embedded in children's rights.

There are other options that we can look at. Many are listed in the motion. We need a bit of a system change. I hope that the Minister, in his summing up, will outline what he can do to ensure that that happens. Perhaps the Minister will also tell the House, specifically with regard to the review being carried out by NICCY and today's NIPSO report, what he and his Department will do in response.

All behaviour is communication, positive or negative. It is important that children's rights are front and centre of anything that we take forward. We thank and commend our teachers today for the amazing work that they do. I believe

that we are all on the same page in wanting to see the changes. We will support the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call the Minister of Education, Peter Weir, to respond to the debate. You have up to 15 minutes.

**Mr Weir:** I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion. The subject is very important and potentially very emotive in its nature. I thank all who have contributed. Their contributions have been fairly constructive in their content and responsible in their tone. Hopefully, the House can unite around that.

I thank everyone who has been involved so far, particularly parents with lived experiences and their children. One parent acknowledged that Northern Ireland was going full steam ahead to protect children from unnecessary restraint and seclusion, and I agree with her. We are making progress, but, while much has been done, there is much more to be done.

I share the concerns expressed by Members today. They have met and heard from parents with lived experiences about how their children had been treated at school. Such treatment is wrong and should not have happened. I recently took receipt of a report from the NIPSO on number of cases, and that is another piece of evidence that will inform my Department's review of the use of restraint and seclusion in education settings. It is because of such cases being brought to my attention by parents, parents' advocacy groups, NIPSO, NICCY and the Education Committee that I have asked officials to undertake a review of existing guidance and practices in this area. Prior to the launch of that review, the Department had already begun updating its pastoral care guidance on the use of reasonable force to restrain or control pupils, and some engagement with stakeholders had commenced.

I am acutely aware that children and young people and the parents, carers and school staff who support them have faced a challenging time over the past year. Hopefully, we are returning to some sort of normality, but the effects of the COVID pandemic have had a significant impact on our children's health and well-being. Now, more than ever, we need to provide clarity on physical intervention and isolation across all education settings but especially when supporting children who have complex needs and may require such intervention as part of their care plan. There is clearly a link not simply to education but to health as well.

Taking all of that into account and despite the fact that there is work ongoing on a comprehensive solution through the review, I took the decision to issue interim guidance to all schools and other educational settings by way of DE Circular 2021/13. The main messages of the interim guidance are as follows: the best interests of the child should guide all decisions taken by staff in relation to children in their care; all children have the same rights; there is a duty on schools to make reasonable adjustments for children with disabilities and not discriminate on the grounds of learning or physical disabilities; reasonable force or restraint should be used only as a measure of last resort and never as a form of punishment; and there is a requirement to record instances of the use of reasonable force or restraint. At this stage, we have not sought to define seclusion or what forms of seclusion,

if any, are permissible in what circumstances. That is because seclusion and deprivation of liberty are still being considered as part of the wider review. However, we have been clear that children should never be locked in a room or left unaccompanied and must be able to leave when they want to.

I am well aware that the interim guidance does not deal with all of the issues or concerns raised here today, nor does it deal with all of the issues raised by parents and their representatives. However, it goes some way to clarify the provisions that are already contained in existing guidance related to the recording, reporting and monitoring of incidents. For the first time, the guidance includes provision for dealing with the isolation of children from the classroom. The practice of a child voluntarily using a calm space or a sensory room — I have seen many fine examples of that throughout the schools estate — where they can regulate their mood can, sometimes, be a positive intervention that benefits the child. That is simply not the same as locking a pupil in a room, unsupervised, that they cannot leave. That practice should not happen, and the interim guidance states that clearly. I hope that that goes some way to alleviate some of the concerns of parents with lived experience. If the guidance is followed, no other child should go through experiences similar to theirs.

**Mr McCrossan:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Weir:** I will give way briefly, but I have a lot to get through.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Minister for giving way and for his solid answer there to reassure parents that this will not happen again. That will send out a strong signal that he is dedicated to resolving the issue and moving it forward. That is a good leap forward, and I thank the Minister for it.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for his intervention. As I have indicated, it is a step forward, but the work is not finished. There is much more to be done.

Prior to issuing the interim guidance to schools, my Department took receipt of detailed legal advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office on the legal status of existing guidance.

I am concerned that I cannot stand here and provide you with an assurance that it is mandatory for schools to record all incidents of seclusion: it is not. It should not be forgotten, however, that existing guidance in that area, which is in the circular, provides clear instructions about who can use reasonable force, where it is appropriate to use it and the procedure for recording incidents where reasonable force is used. It also advises that schools should have a written policy on the use of reasonable force that should be made known to pupils.

#### 1.15 pm

It appears clear that the guidance has not been followed in all cases. I completely acknowledge that that has led to distress. I believe it is the case that the overwhelming majority of education staff are very sensitive to the needs of our children and respect their dignity when providing them with support. The professionalism of our teaching and wider education workforce should not be forgotten.

I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of the review or any proposals for change that will come from it. However, at this stage, I expect that any new guidance will clarify



issues on the use of restrictive practice and will point to evidence-based preventative and therapeutic approaches, such as positive behavioural strategies, that will not only help children and their parents and carers but benefit school staff.

The consideration of future recording and reporting methods will form a central tenet of the review with a view to strengthening the provisions already in place. That will include the consideration of options for the central collation of data on incidents in schools. At present, data is not collected, with records held only at school level. That practice means that, to some extent, the Department and the EA are unsighted on the prevalence of the use of restraint and seclusion. Mandatory recording will require legislative change, but if, as is likely, that is a recommendation of the review, I will not shy away from implementing it. I understand that my officials are already exploring how that might be done so that any proposals for change can be informed.

I note that the motion mentions the availability of training for teachers and other school staff who may deal with autistic pupils or pupils with other complex needs. The Education Authority's children and young people's services has in place a wide range of specialist training courses for teachers, classroom assistants, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and parents. Those courses include the autism advisory and intervention service; behavioural support service and provision; critical incident support in emotional health and well-being; nurture advice and support services; SEN early years inclusion services; SEN inclusion services for learning and medical needs; and the special educational needs and disability (SEND) 2016 implementation team. Along with the EA and other training providers, the review will consider whether additional or, indeed, mandatory training for teaching and other school staff is required. Consideration will be dependent on an agreed position on the changes that will emerge from the review. It is clear that any form of mandatory training will come at a considerable cost. We are all aware of the limited budget, so we have to make sure that training requirements must be not only fit for purpose but compatible with resources.

It is important that we move ahead with urgency to protect children from the unnecessary use of restraint and seclusion. Perhaps in the few minutes that are still available to me, Members will afford me the opportunity to update them on what, I believe, is the significant progress that has been made in recent months on moving the review forward. A working group consisting of officials from my Department and other relevant Departments, alongside the EA and the Education and Training Inspectorate, is well established and is meeting regularly throughout 2021 until the completion of the review. The group is researching guidance and other relevant reports on the issue from across neighbouring jurisdictions with a view to extracting best practice that may be adopted in schools in Northern Ireland. I have also established a reference group comprising associated professionals and statutory bodies such as NICCY, the Children's Law Centre and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which have all agreed to act as a critical friend to quality-assure and assess proposals for change as the review progresses.

Officials have undertaken significant engagement with parents and have met Positive and Active Behaviour

Support Scotland and the International Coalition Against Restraint and Seclusion. Those meetings included evidence from local parents with lived experiences who, supported by their parent advocates, made presentations to a joint meeting of the working and reference groups just over a week ago, on 11 May. The Department continues to liaise with those parents and their advocacy groups and has opened a two-way channel of communication. Their voices are and will continue to be central to the review.

The Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner is undertaking a separate review of the issue, with NIPSO acting in an advisory role. NICCY will review the information available from schools on restraint and seclusion, including training, guidance, usage and follow-through, with processes being assessed against best practice and the experience of children and their parents. The NICCY review will include evidence gathering from pupils and parents with lived experiences. The Department is liaising with NICCY with a view to utilising the evidence collected to inform its review, and we are keen to work in partnership with NICCY on that.

My Department is also liaising with the Department of Health. As Ms Bradshaw, I think, mentioned, it is important that this does not sit only in the Department of Education; indeed, the Department of Health has undertaken a review of the use of restrictive practices in health and social care settings. While my officials are not directly involved in the work that Health is doing, they are being kept fully abreast of developments and will ensure that future definitions of restraint and/or seclusion align with those emerging from the DH review, suitably adapted for use in education. It is important that Departments do not go in different directions.

Members will be interested to know when I expect the guidance to be published. It is part of the Department's 2021-22 business plan, which has a commitment that it will be completed by March 2022 at the latest. I expect that guidance will issue in the forthcoming academic year. I would like to complete the review as quickly as possible, and I have made it a priority for the Department's inclusion and well-being directorate. The large number of stakeholders involved and the complexity of that area of work preclude me from making promises on the timing of completion that may not be realistic.

Despite the urgency, we should do the job once and do it thoroughly and correctly. We have further engagement to do. We want, above all, to get this right, and our children and young people deserve no less. Any and all proposals for change emerging from the review, including any that require legislative change, will be subject to approval. Clearly, where legislative change is needed, the House will have a key role, and I hope that the same united voice as we have today can be carried through into any legislative change.

**Mr Sheehan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education):** On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Minister and all of the other contributors to today's debate.

The Committee Chairperson began the debate by referring to the need for updated guidance on how and when it is suitable to use restrictive interventions on some of our most vulnerable children. The Committee has heard over recent months from Parent Action and the parents of

children affected by those practices. We sought the views of, among others, the Children's Commissioner and the Children's Law Centre. We had a special briefing from the Public Services Ombudsman on her work on the matter. We are grateful to the International Coalition Against Restraint and Seclusion for its international perspective, and Paris Hilton's attention to our Committee hearings amplified the coverage of this heartbreaking issue.

The Committee calls on the Minister to work urgently:

*“to develop and introduce, in partnership with teachers, parents and all other relevant stakeholders, up-to-date statutory guidance on therapeutic-based, non-aversive, positive behaviour strategies”.*

I welcome the fact that the Minister referred to all of those issues. In the last two months, the Committee has heard from departmental officials twice on the issue, and it is clear that no one is in any doubt about the need for reform. However, the COVID pandemic that has diverted so much time and effort from other policy aims has served only to prove this central social truth:

*“The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable”.*

Our schoolchildren, particularly those who, as the motion states, have additional support needs, including those with physical or learning disabilities or who are neurodivergent, are among our most defenceless citizens. Our decisions on their behalf must be in the interests of their inherent dignity and their equal opportunity to develop their talents and personality through education.

The review that is under way and the interim guidance published by the Department have been well rehearsed today. They are stepping stones, and we are committed to the end goal of compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, be it through statutory guidance alone, legislation on restraint and seclusion or incorporation of the convention on its own or via a local bill of rights.

I do not intend to rehearse today's contributions. They were very much all on the one theme, with everybody singing from the same hymn sheet, with the possible exception of the Member for North Antrim's ill-advised and ill-informed intervention. He saw a child in a distressed condition. I think that he may have said that he was the chair of the board of governors, and he said that he could not do anything. Why would he be able to do anything? Was he given special training at the Bar on how to intervene on children with challenging behaviour? No, probably not. He said that the teacher could not do anything. He, as a member of the board of governors, should then have been responsible for ensuring that staff were trained on how to intervene properly, whether with de-escalation techniques or positive behaviour strategies. I see that the Member is not in his place. He made that ill-informed intervention and then departed.

I now want to say a few words as Sinn Féin spokesperson on education. During the debate, reference was made to the harrowing nature of the evidence that we heard over the past number of weeks and months, particularly evidence from parents. Deirdre and Rodney Shakespeare and their son Harry have been mentioned on numerous occasions, but we heard from other parents as well. It reminded me in many ways of the evidence that we heard

about the ill treatment of patients with severe learning disabilities in Muckamore, where there were clear guidelines on when seclusion was to be used. Despite it supposedly being used as a last resort, patients were, in some instances, being put in seclusion 70, 80 or 90 times a month. That certainly was not a last resort.

In Muckamore, all that was recorded. When the regulator went in, it was able to see those recordings, but it did not do anything about it. That is also important in this situation. It is not just about clear guidelines or legislation or about reporting and recording; it is about ensuring that those who have responsibility for oversight and supervision are held to account. The regulator in Muckamore saw that patients were being placed in seclusion 80 and 90 times a month, and that did not raise a red flag. If the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) had done its job properly, perhaps the situation in Muckamore would have ended sooner. We need to ensure that there is oversight and accountability.

We also heard disturbing evidence from parents on stimming. That points up instances in which teachers are not trained properly, particularly for working with children with special needs. Stimming is something that autistic children use often. It is repetitive physical movements or sounds that children make. It usually happens when they are stressed or suffering from anxiety. It may be rapid hand movements, rocking or making particular noises. As someone said earlier, however, it is about communication. It is an attempt by the child to communicate that there is some sort of problem.

### 1.30 pm

We heard from one parent about a child who was stimming by using repetitive hand movements. The child was tied to a chair with its own school bag. That is absolutely unacceptable, under any circumstances whatsoever. I agree with the points that Robbie made and that practically everyone else made. There needs to be proper training for teachers in how to deal with such situations. Many people who are involved in dealing with children with special needs, or even with adults with learning disabilities, who may at times present —.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Member for giving way. He has made a solid and strong contribution. Does he agree with me that training is absolutely necessary and that resourcing is critical? For a class of 15 children, would it not be to their benefit, and to that of the school, for there to be someone specific in the school who could be called on to come in and help roll out the techniques, or whatever, in those situations? Would that, as well as training, be a solution?

**Mr Sheehan:** It sounds sensible to me. I am no expert, but the issues of training and resourcing go hand in hand. I notice that the Minister made reference to resourcing. He also said that we have to get this right. If we have to get it right, we have to make sure that the proper resourcing is there in order to get it right.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Member for giving way. The Member and, indeed, the Minister mentioned resourcing and pressures in their speeches. Does the Member agree with me that, given that, in Northern Ireland, we have the Children's Services Co-operation Act, which legally requires relevant Departments to work together, utilising

it is something that the Minister and the Executive can perhaps do together on resourcing and budgets?

**Mr Sheehan:** I absolutely agree with that.

I have nothing more to add. I thank everyone again for their contribution, and it is good that everyone seems to be on the same page.

I commend the motion to the House. Go raibh maith agat.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly expresses concern at the lack of statutory guidance from the Department of Education on the use of restrictive intervention on children and young people, particularly those who have additional support needs, including those with physical or learning disabilities or who are neurodivergent; calls on the Minister of Education to develop and introduce, in partnership with teachers, parents and all other relevant stakeholders, up-to-date statutory guidance on therapeutic-based, non-aversive, positive behaviour strategies; and further calls on the Minister to fund mandatory training on this approach for all staff working directly with children and young people, provide statutory guidance on restraint definitions, last-resort definitions, and human rights-based guidance in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), introduce mandatory recording and reporting of all incidents of restrictive intervention and abolish the use of isolation rooms.*

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

*(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair)*

## Private Members' Business

### Green New Deal

**Mr Blair:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly recognises that recovery from the pandemic and tackling the climate crisis go hand in hand, requiring an investment-led, green recovery that delivers on social and economic justice and rapidly decarbonises our economy; and calls on the Executive to deliver a green new deal that will create an equitable, sustainable economy filled with well-paid, secure, low-carbon jobs in care, education and health as well as in industry and infrastructure, and to ensure well-being and inclusion are at the centre of government decision-making.*

**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.

**Mr Blair:** In the wake of the catastrophic coronavirus crisis, our immediate priority must now be to avoid further disasters. The world faces a climate emergency with potentially disastrous consequences. Average global temperatures have risen by about 1°C. A report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (UNIPCC) on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C warned that the effects of climate change are already irreversible and that we have only about one decade to act before it is too late. The report found that human activity is the dominant cause of observed climate change over the past century and that a changing climate is causing sea levels to rise and an increase in damaging fires, severe storms, droughts and other extreme weather events. Global warming at or above 2°C will cause famine, disease, mass migration, climate-driven floods and heat waves and will cost the UK billions of pounds. Current trajectories show a global warming increase of 3°C by 2100. We are on track to take the planet to an unprecedented climate.

The motion calls for the creation of a green new deal. The Assembly must make radical changes and it must act now, not because it is convenient but because it is the right thing to do. The motion also addresses the need for Northern Ireland to play its part in global challenges.

The past decade of rising inequality has shown us that austerity is not the answer to a crisis. Under the existing economy, we will never overcome climate change. Throughout history, periods of great upheaval have sparked incredible change. Look at the creation of the welfare state and the NHS after World War II, for example. Those changes were indeed radical and perhaps previously unimaginable, yet they remain absolutely critical to our lives generations later. The pandemic provides us with a similar historic chance for change; real change that could provide better opportunities, protect our planet and better protect us from future crises so that we never again need to face what we have faced during the past year. We are not alone in our demands either. Climate

and economic experts are clear that we need a green recovery, with huge investment and urgent radical changes to our economy. To be frank, while we have felt that our lives have been at a standstill during the last year, climate change has continued to accelerate. Radical change is not just sensible, it is critical.

Industrialised nations such as the UK bear disproportionate responsibility for climate change. Just like in the pandemic, all of us will feel the impact of climate change but we will feel it disproportionately. Millions of people across the globe are already immediately threatened. Climate change is destroying livelihoods, infrastructure and communities and forcing people from their homes, towns and countries. That is neither just nor fair. The pandemic has laid bare the injustices and weaknesses in our society and economy. We have seen the damage caused by Governments acting too slowly, chronically underfunded public services and flawed short-term and self-serving decisions. We simply cannot make those same mistakes when tackling the climate crisis. In Northern Ireland, we need a new deal: a green new deal that recognises that tackling the climate emergency goes hand in hand with economic and social justice. A green new deal is about rapidly decarbonising our economy and, in doing so, creating an equitable, sustainable economy filled with well-paid, secure green jobs in existing and emerging industries.

The Alliance Party recently brought forward its own green new deal. The policies in that document show how we can simultaneously combat the climate emergency and inequality through investment and radical change and by breaking down the barriers of division. We have seen, from recent discussions in the Chamber, that movement towards a sustainable future has been divided by the false notion that we have to choose between our planet and our economy. The Alliance Party's green new deal not only rejects that notion but brings forward proposals to create 50,000 secure green new jobs by stimulating our economy and reskilling workers. It is about preserving our planet for future generations, achieving the greenhouse gas and toxic emission reductions that are needed to stay under 1.5°C, restoring critical infrastructure, the repurposing of housing, expanding access to transport and having an all-encompassing approach to ensure that no community is left behind in the process towards aggressive climate goals that will transform the economy.

We need a vision for a united community: an inclusive, dynamic, prosperous and sustainable Northern Ireland, where we can all thrive, enjoy living freely and securely, and be treated with dignity in a region that is rich with opportunities and biodiversity. We have a chance for change: change for the good of our people and our planet. We have an opportunity to deliver a recovery plan that better protects us in the future. There is historical precedent that fiscal stimulus measures are sound prescriptions in a crisis. We need serious investment to mitigate and adapt to climate change, but it will cost us more both financially and existentially in the long term if we do not act now.

Experts are increasingly stressing the need for a major investment-led green recovery, because addressing the climate emergency goes hand in hand with economic and social transformation. The fight against the climate emergency requires more than environmental policy

tweaks. The gravity of the situation requires the green new deal to demand urgent, radical change on how we make policy in the longer term for our security and collective prosperity. That should be our vision for an urgent, radical overhaul of the policies and practices that hinder our progress and exploit our people and planet. Going forward, we must grasp the enormous opportunities for a sustainable green economy with a bespoke green new deal for a better future. Investing in infrastructure and industry, securing clean air and water, climate and community resilience, healthy food, access to nature and a sustainable environment for all are vital components and required actions.

We know that developing countries have a limited capacity to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. We can and must contribute our fair share to enable mitigation and adaptation activities that uphold environmental justice across the globe. Developed countries can help developing countries in that regard. Developing countries are on the front line of climate change the most, though they have contributed the least to the causes. A green new deal will recognise that we need to build resilience in the face of worsening and more frequent climate-related disasters that marginalise the communities that often bear the brunt of those disasters.

We need serious investment in our infrastructure and transportation systems. We need to invest in green roof technology and innovative urban architecture to address not just the carbon emissions of the agricultural and architectural fields but the intersectional issues of food security and climate change. Any green new deal is not sector-specific. All sectors have a major part to play in tackling our carbon emissions.

As we seek to recover from COVID-19, I hope that all Departments and sectors will work together to protect the environment and existing jobs and to bring forward new green jobs. The Alliance Party is committed to having a just, green recovery and an urgent and radical overhaul of the policies and practices that have hindered our progress to date.

Alliance Party colleagues, who will speak later in the debate, will give further detail on the departmental responsibilities. In tabling the motion, our intention is to highlight the urgent need for a green new deal that epitomises environmental justice for front-line communities, especially under-resourced groups, and calls for a just transition to a clean economy.

We have learned many lessons from the pandemic, but distressing lessons have been that high-impact threats must be acted upon in a timely fashion and that delay is costly. We must act now. The decisions that we make in our response to the global health pandemic, and the actions that we take to rebuild our economies, will determine whether humanity succeeds or fails. It is vital that we work together to reduce, urgently, our carbon emissions, and mitigate the impact of climate change. I commend the motion.

#### 1.45 pm

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Members for tabling the motion. It is timely to recognise that today marks a positive step forward in the recovery. It is good to see many of Northern

Ireland's cafes, pubs and restaurants open. That is a good step forward.

Obviously, the Democratic Unionist Party fully supports the need to ensure that the economic recovery is underpinned by initiatives that are not only sustainable but environmentally responsible and support decarbonisation. It will also be important that investment is inclusive of, and fair towards, all communities, households and industries across Northern Ireland. We agree that sustainable solutions can benefit standards of living for people across Northern Ireland and help tackle deprivation and isolation. There is no doubt that the motion cuts across all Departments. I will speak about that shortly.

Democratic Unionist Party Ministers continue to champion the green recovery and the need to address climate change around the Executive table. The inter-ministerial group on green growth has been established by Edwin Poots, the AERA Minister. The Executive's overarching, multi-decade, green growth strategy and delivery framework for Northern Ireland aims to transform our society towards net zero by 2050, protect and enhance our environment and deliver sustainable economic growth.

We recognise that the desire expressed in the motion is to decarbonise our economy rapidly. Of course, at the same time, we have to ensure that the transition is fair and just, and that it does not place a disproportionate burden on certain industries, particularly our agri-food sector. There is a need to take on board independent, expert advice, including the clear finding by the Climate Change Committee that even the reduction of meat and dairy production to 50% and the increase of tree planting would not be enough to allow us to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

There are other departmental initiatives within our remit. In recent weeks, the Economy Minister launched the 10X Economy plan. It is her vision for a decade of innovation in the regional economy. One of the guiding principles of that plan is around supporting a greener, sustainable economy. That links in with the economic recovery action plan, which the Department has also launched. That plan includes a number of headline commitments, such as delivering a net zero carbon energy transition, improving the energy efficiency of buildings and industry and encouraging green innovation in renewables and low-carbon technologies. Those are areas on which we need our Departments to be working.

There will also be massive opportunities to exploit emerging green technology across various sectors, including energy, transport and manufacturing. It is important that we have the right skills mix, and that we ensure that our skills strategies are aligned with that potential for growth, moving forward. Training and upskilling our young people must be at the heart of that. It is one thing to pledge to create thousands of green jobs, but there needs to be buy-in from private industry and education and training providers in order to ensure that the capacity and skills exist.

My final point relates to hydrogen technology. Northern Ireland is uniquely placed to use renewable electricity to produce green hydrogen. It would make use of the wind that is available when the demand for electricity is lower. Onshore wind provides more than 80% of Northern Ireland's renewable capacity, and we need to exploit that.

There is real potential for Northern Ireland to become a global centre of excellence for the hydrogen economy. That would see local manufacturers rapidly growing in order to try to meet the worldwide demand.

In closing, I thank the Members for tabling the motion. We will support it.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. He raised a valid point about hydrogen and the use of wind. In some cases, there is an inherent contradiction in those who advocate a green new deal, new energy and so on. They are sometimes the ones who champion opposing planning applications for installing some of those facilities. How do we ensure that they appreciate that they cannot have it both ways if we are to move forward on the issue?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Member for raising that point. When looking at planning issues, it is important that parties recognise that, in order to further a lot of the aims that I outlined, we need to make sure that planning is processed as quickly as possible.

That leads me on, finally, to the Department for Infrastructure. More needs to be done. For example, the Electric Vehicle Association Northern Ireland (EVANI) recently highlighted the number of broken chargers across Northern Ireland. Other Ministers very much need to step up. It is all fine and well to bring motions like these, and we will happily support them, but we need Ministers to take them seriously in order to ensure that we can deliver on the many objectives that we need to meet.

**Dr Archibald:** I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate, and I thank the Members for tabling the motion.

The recovery from COVID needs to deliver a more fair and equal society and economy. It has been said many times in the Chamber and beyond that we cannot just return to where we were previously but that we need to build back better, as the saying goes. The imperative of tackling the climate emergency is clear, but it has to be done on the basis of a fair and just transition to decarbonisation. Those who can afford it least must not pay the most. The transition to a decarbonised society must be planned with workers, trade unions and communities. Sinn Féin is committed to ensuring that ordinary people do not pay the price for the current crisis, and it will resist any attempts from the Tories to place the burden of the current crisis on the backs of ordinary, hard-working people.

Businesses, particularly our small businesses, need to be supported in order to sustain existing jobs and to create new jobs. We need to support workers and families. That means giving people opportunities to work in jobs that have decent pay and fair working conditions. Sinn Féin is committed to banning zero-hours contracts and to strengthening workers' protections in the workplace. We also need to remove barriers to work by ensuring that people have opportunities to gain skills, start their own businesses or have access to more affordable childcare. I welcomed Deirdre Hargey's announcement last week of the upfront childcare grant to help people to get back to work.

Our young people have been very badly impacted by the pandemic and will need particular support. Sinn Féin wants

a youth guarantee that means that every young person aged 16 to 24 has the opportunity to be in education, training or a job. I am very glad that the Job Start scheme has now opened, and I know that businesses in my own constituency of East Derry have already taken it up.

Businesses need to be supported to rebuild and recover. As Gary said, with so many businesses reopening, today is a great day. Our recovery must focus on protecting jobs and livelihoods in the hardest-hit sectors as well as on creating new jobs in sectors that will help to meet our climate obligations, as outlined in the motion, and create a more resilient economy and society.

We need to have a greater focus on community wealth and the social economy in order to ensure that our communities benefit and develop in tandem with the economy. During the pandemic, lots of people have been working remotely. That has benefits for work-life balance as well as for their local areas. Supporting that to continue can help to promote greater regional balance. One way of doing that would be to expand the regional hubs, which were announced by Minister Murphy, into the private sector. We should look at that. Our economic recovery must also maximise our economic potential as part of the EU single market and an all-island economy, bringing jobs and investment to the North. Disappointingly, that has been lacking from any of the plans that have so far been brought forward by the Economy Minister.

In reference specifically to the motion, central to delivering a fair and just transition and recovery is a green new deal. A green new deal can bring together all the other aspects of economic recovery: creating jobs; providing skills and training opportunities; delivering better health and well-being outcomes through tackling fuel poverty, for example; more active transport; and more green spaces. It should be one of the key pillars of our economic recovery strategy, but, given the plans that we have seen to date from the Economy Minister, I am not convinced that it is. Green recovery is mentioned, but there is a lack of detail on what it means, and it has no coordinated green new deal element.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. Not for the first time, the party opposite takes every opportunity have a go at the Tories and the Economy Minister, but the Executive are never mentioned. Will the Member clarify for me whether the Economy Minister's deal was approved by the Executive, or is the Economy Minister on a solo run? Do the Executive pick and choose when they are in favour of something? That would have serious implications for what will happen over the next few months.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Last week, when that question was put to the Economy Minister about her 10X plan, we heard that it had not been endorsed by the Executive. The motion calls on the Executive to deliver, and it is important that we develop strategies on a cross-departmental basis, because recovery will be delivered by all Departments.

My final point is that, in my opinion, well-being should not just be part of the decision-making process; it needs to be measured. We all know that what gets measured gets managed, and we certainly need to ensure that our society is measured by more than its economic output.

In conclusion, Sinn Féin will support the motion. I agree with its content, as I imagine that everyone here does, not least because a green new deal was a commitment in New Decade, New Approach.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Given that it is almost 1.57 pm, and Question Time is due to commence at 2.00 pm, I propose that the House take its ease until 2.00 pm. The debate will resume after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Mark Durkan.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Infrastructure

#### Sydenham Wastewater Pumping Station

1. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the Sydenham wastewater pumping station is being replaced. (AQO 2076/17-22)

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** I confirm that, subject to the necessary funding being available, Northern Ireland Water intends to replace the Sydenham wastewater pumping station. Northern Ireland Water has reached agreement in principle with Belfast City Council on the preferred location of the replacement facility, and I have been advised that environmental modelling and design development to deliver the best engineering solution is under way. Geotechnical investigations that were completed in March 2020 will inform the design and help to establish the most suitable construction method. The completion of the outline design, along with planning and other approvals, is expected in summer 2022, followed by the procurement and award of the contract in autumn 2023. It is hoped that construction will commence in spring 2024 and that construction, testing and commissioning will be completed in autumn 2026.

I stress that the dates depend on the outcome of ongoing environmental modelling, on obtaining the necessary statutory approvals and on the availability of funding to deliver the project. The current estimate for the investment needed to replace the pumping station is around £32 million, which is included in Northern Ireland Water's overall PC21 business plan for the six-year period from 2021 to 2027. The replacement of the pumping station is part of the Living with Water programme, which is a 12-year drainage and waste water plan for the greater Belfast area costing in the region of £1.4 billion. In line with the Executive's New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) priorities, I will make a strong case for the pumping station scheme, along with the wider Living with Water programme, to be funded.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Minister for her reply. She will be aware that the pumping station has been a problem for quite a number of years. In fact, on two occasions, seven, eight or nine houses were completely flooded with raw sewage. Moreover, those who live directly opposite, in a street — a residential area — live in the shadow of the building.

Five years is a long time to wait with that potential flooding at the back of your mind or an inappropriately sited facility directly opposite your house. Will the Minister try, as best she can, to accelerate the programme beyond the current five-year timescale that she outlined?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. I appreciate how concerning the situation is for residents and for him as their elected representative. The outcome of the recently completed drainage area study of the area

served by the pumping station highlighted the need for a further environmental modelling study to assess the effects of outflows from the station on the Connswater river. That study is ongoing and will take time to complete, but I assure the Member that I will make sure that my officials do what they can, working with Northern Ireland Water, to accelerate this important work.

**Mr Lyttle:** Having spent New Year's Eve volunteering with the Red Cross and delivering sandbags to the people of Sydenham, I am acutely aware of the extent of the problem in the area. I add my voice to the request for the programme to be expedited as quickly as possible. When the scheme is completed, how positive will it be for the area?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. The scheme will make a huge difference to residents in the area. As I said to Mr Newton, we will do what we can to accelerate the programme. I also assure the Member's constituents that Northern Ireland Water will consult with the local communities affected by the proposals in advance of construction so that they will be involved. I will ensure that they are kept fully updated.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Minister provide an update on the Living with Water programme?

**Ms Mallon:** 'Living with Water in Belfast: An Integrated Plan for Drainage and Wastewater Management in Greater Belfast' was published for consultation on 11 November 2020. The consultation closed on 29 January 2021. Officials are considering the responses received and will prepare a consultation report that will be taken into account as they draft the final plan.

The draft plan indicates that approximately £1.4 billion of investment is needed over the next 12 years to upgrade drainage and waste water infrastructure in greater Belfast in order to protect against flooding, enhance the water environment and facilitate growth. The focus of the programme is on developing integrated, catchment-based solutions to manage rainwater on the surface and, where possible, avoid hard-engineered drainage solutions that involve long-term operating and maintenance costs. I intend to bring the final plan to the Executive for approval in the coming weeks.

**Ms Dolan:** Will the Minister provide an update on the steps that her Department has taken to adopt the Ravensbrae waste water treatment plant in Garrison?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for her question. She will be aware that Northern Ireland Water has been trying to be helpful, but the difficulty is that the area is unadopted, so it is outwith Northern Ireland Water's statutory responsibilities. I am keen to see where we can be further supportive, however, and detailed work is going on to understand exactly what work is required and what the costings are. I have asked my officials to continue to work constructively with residents to see what we may be able to do, even given the restrictions, to assist them with what is a difficult situation.

### Climate Change

2. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's actions to address climate change. (AQO 2077/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** The New Decade, New Approach agreement commits the Executive to tackling climate change and addressing its immediate and longer-term impacts and to creating legislation and targets for reducing carbon emissions. In my tenure as Minister for Infrastructure, I have taken forward several projects that will help to mitigate the climate emergency and ensure that Northern Ireland adapts to the impacts of climate change.

The projects include a range of initiatives to facilitate modal shift to more sustainable travel options, including investment in new and existing cycleways; working with councils to deliver sustainable local transport plans; and £30 million of investment in low-emission buses for Translink, £66 million of investment in low- and zero-emission buses for Translink and investment in excess of £60 million to purchase new train carriages in order to encourage more people out of their cars and on to rail.

I have also invested £20 million in a blue-green infrastructure fund to make public transport and active travel a more attractive and efficient alternative to the use of private cars. As I said in my previous answer, I have also brought forward the Living with Water programme, which will revolutionise the way in which drainage and waste water are managed in order to prevent flooding that is caused by climate change.

I appreciate the role that tree planting can play in mitigating climate change and the multiple benefits that woodland creation can provide for society. I am also rolling out LED lights across Northern Ireland. That work has resulted in a significant reduction, by about 24%, in energy consumption. I intend to make further allocations to LED retrofitting in 2021-22. To date, I have allocated £3.7 million of capital to greenway projects through the blue-green infrastructure fund.

I remain committed to doing what I can, working with councils and local communities so that we all play our part in tackling the climate emergency.

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Minister for her answer. It is obvious that she is making real progress on tackling the climate crisis. We in South Down want to be able to play our part. For example, many people have contacted me — I know that this is not her direct responsibility — about e-car charging points, which they would like to see more of in the community.

Will the Minister commit to meeting me so that we can discuss ways in which the community can respond to and assist with the shared ambition of tackling the climate crisis?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. He raises a very important point. He rightly highlights the fact that the e-car public charge point network in Northern Ireland is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). Recently, I met ESB and representatives of the motor industry to identify further opportunities for collaboration in order to advance the e-charging network so that it plays its part in tackling the climate crisis. My officials are assisting ESB as it seeks to replace up to 60 charge points that were installed as far back as 2011-12 and are now experiencing faults.

Members will know that I have made changes to the planning system through permitted development rights to make it easier to install e-charging infrastructure. I am

pleased that my Department has been able to provide funding from the EU INTERREG-funded Facilitating a Sustainable Transition to EVs in the Regions (FASTER) project, which will see a number of charging points put in place across Northern Ireland. Of course, my Department has also been leading a transport working group to inform the elements of the energy strategy for Northern Ireland. A key part of that work involves the electrification of vehicles.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister has kind of answered the question, but she knows that the electric-charging network is worsening and definitely needs upgraded. Can the Minister clarify whether or not she will support ESB with funding to repair and upgrade that network? It is important that we encourage people to use electric vehicles.

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. As I said, I met ESB and my Department is working with it on retrofitting. The Member is absolutely right. We need to improve and expand the charging network and people's ability to charge their vehicles at home. My officials have been working with the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles, because it has funding. We are working with councils to enable that funding to be drawn down. As I said, I recently met representatives of the motor industry. As discussed, affordability is a barrier, but there is also anxiety around range. I will continue to work with the Office of Zero Emission Vehicles. I have written to the British Government, asking them to identify what funding is available in Northern Ireland so that we can meet our targets. I remain very much committed to doing much more in that area, working with all the relevant partners.

**Mr Nesbitt:** As recorded by nirect, there are 337 electric-charging points across Northern Ireland. Anecdotally, I have been told that up to half of those are not working at any given time. Can the Minister confirm that and also that, as it appears, there are none in the Strangford constituency?

**Ms Mallon:** The Member is correct to identify that there is an issue with faulty e-charging points. The difficulty is that those were installed many years back. That is why I am pleased that my Department is working with ESB to retrofit a number of e-charging points. However, we also need to provide additional e-charging infrastructure. A key part of that will be enabling people to charge their vehicles overnight at home. I continue to work with Ministers in London and local councils to make sure that we can draw down the maximum amount of funding, so that we can improve the e-charging infrastructure and have charging points in the Member's constituency.

**Mr Muir:** This is an important issue. It is fair to say that the e-charging network is a shambles. The Department has 1,283 staff car-parking spaces but only two e-charging car-parking spaces. Will the Minister commit to doing what her counterpart has done down South and rebalance her budget towards priorities that will tackle climate change, such as e-cars, active travel and public transport?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. As I have stated in the responses to other Members, I have made a number of changes to improve the e-charging infrastructure, whether through retrofitting or changes to the planning system itself. As I said, I am working with a range of partners to identify funding. I established, for the first time, a £20 million blue-green infrastructure fund to



achieve the very outcomes that the Member highlighted. I have asked officials to look at what we can do in the area of e-charging infrastructure in particular and, with financial support, what role my Department may be able to play. I recently met Minister Poots on this issue and am keen to meet the Economy Minister as well, because we need to work across our Departments and situate this very much in an Executive-led approach to tackling the climate emergency.

## Northern Ireland Water

3. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has started a review into the future of Northern Ireland Water. (AQO 2078/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** The Department has not started a review into the future of Northern Ireland Water. Northern Ireland Water was established in 2007 and, today, holds dual status as a Government-owned company and a non-departmental public body. Since its formation, Northern Ireland Water has significantly improved the delivery of water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland. Throughout the most recent regulatory price control, PC15, Northern Ireland Water consistently exceeded the levels of service and efficiency required by the Utility Regulator. Northern Ireland Water now makes recurring annual savings of around £65 million, compared to the legacy Water Service pre 2007.

When compared with the most efficient water and sewerage companies in England and Wales, Northern Ireland Water has closed the efficiency gap from 49% in 2007-08 to within 7% today.

### 2.15 pm

Given those achievements, I see no clear benefit to reviewing the future of Northern Ireland Water. What I have done and will continue to do is to present the argument to my Executive colleagues for sufficient public funding for Northern Ireland Water. I recognise that modern, well-maintained and sufficiently funded sustainable water and waste water infrastructure is essential to deliver economic growth, address regional imbalance and tackle the climate emergency.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Minister for her reply. Recently, at the Finance Committee, we discussed Northern Ireland Water and its future funding mechanisms; indeed, having heard the Minister's previous answers to the Assembly, one realises that around £1.5 billion is needed, even as an interim figure, to meet Belfast's waste water requirements, never mind those of the rest of Northern Ireland. Bearing that in mind, is the Minister in favour of mutualisation, bringing in water charges or some other hybrid model? Frankly, the situation is unsustainable. Northern Ireland Water will not be able to continue as it is.

**Ms Mallon:** My position, which is shared by the Executive, is that Northern Ireland Water should be publicly owned. Therefore, I continue to make the case that we need to ensure that it has sufficient public funds to fulfil that position and the desire of the Executive for it to be publicly owned. I will continue to make the case for funding at the Executive table.

I want to be absolutely clear: as Minister for Infrastructure, I do not support the introduction of water charges.

**Ms Ni Chuilín:** The Minister mentioned the Living with Water programme a few times and acknowledged that it is, largely, a programme for greater Belfast. What is her Department doing to ensure that there is regional balance, particularly for areas that need water and waste water infrastructure upgrades?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for her question. As well as the Living with Water work in Belfast, we are engaging in a study in Derry. My officials are finalising the considerations of that report. Then, I will use that to identify the next steps forward. The reality is that, because we have had historical underinvestment in our water and waste water infrastructure, we now have over 100 locations that are either at or beyond developmental capacity. The issue does not just affect Belfast: I would argue that it affects nearly every one of the constituencies represented by Members across the House.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Further to the Minister's last response about the impact across the North, I know that, in my constituency, planning applications have been refused or put on hold because of the lack of capacity, particularly for sewage. I know that, time and time again, the Minister has called for greater investment by the Executive in water and sewerage infrastructure. Can she outline the impact that that lack of investment is having across the North?

**Ms Mallon:** As the Member rightly highlights, the historical underfunding of Northern Ireland Water is now manifesting itself in a growing number of areas where there are development constraints. As I said, there are over 100 such areas with a further 37 under stress. It is the responsibility of the Executive to address that constrained funding for public services. We have to be absolutely honest and real: if we do not address the water and waste water infrastructure difficulties, we will not be able to build the many new homes that are needed. We will not be able to have the economic growth that our citizens deserve. It is absolutely fundamental that, if we, as an Executive, are to deliver on our Programme for Government, we realise the investment that is required in water and waste water infrastructure across the North.

## Active Travel Resource Budget 2021-22

4. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action she is taking to rebalance her resource budget towards active travel in 2021-22. (AQO 2079/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I would hope that all Members are well aware that my Department's resource budget presents an ongoing challenge for the delivery of its statutory duties. This financial year continues to be very challenging. When inflationary pay and price pressures are taken into account, there is, effectively, a real-terms cut. Members may also be aware that the increase of only 3% on the 2020-21 opening position has been attributed specifically to Northern Ireland Water. That means that there is little to no flexibility in my resource funding to rebalance towards anything other than to focus on delivering statutory and other essential duties. However, I am committed to investing in active travel, as we have to address the issues of how we travel if we are to deal with the challenges that we face in respect of health and well-being in the climate emergency. Last year, I announced a £20 million capital blue-green infrastructure fund, and I am committed to delivering a similar level of capital funding this year. In

addition to that, I am looking at opportunities, within the constraints with which I am operating, to fund activities from the resource budget.

**Ms Armstrong:** Minister, I agree that it is part of your essential duties to consider climate change, and one of the ways that we can do that is through active travel. You mentioned the £20 million capital, but that is significantly less than 5% of your capital budget. How can we hope to move forward a blue-green change to the way that we travel if it is not funded appropriately? Can you increase the funding available for the blue-green fund through other capital options?

**Ms Mallon:** There is a responsibility on all of us, as Ministers and as citizens in our society, to play our part in climate action. I would like to do so much more, but I have to operate within the funding envelope that I have been given. I remain committed to doing what I can within those financial constraints when it comes to climate action. That is why my intention is to roll on the £20 million blue-green fund. As I said, I am working through difficult scenarios on the resource side with my officials to see what we may be able to do there.

The reality is that, every time I go to do something more or new, I have to look at stopping something that the Department is already carrying out. As Members will know, the role of my Department is so operational and impacts on everybody's life that that throws up very difficult scenarios. It is a difficult balancing act, but I am committed to doing what I can. That has been demonstrated in the blue-green fund, and I hope that councils have continued to develop their proposals so that I will be in a position to financially support many more projects in this financial year.

**Mr McGuigan:** I acknowledge the ambition that the Minister has shown. She will be aware that her Department has recently taken some criticism about slow progress on active travel measures, particularly when it comes to progressing cycling-only infrastructure. The Minister outlined the economic, environmental and health benefits of active travel. Is she considering introducing an active travel Bill, which would help put active travel on a statutory footing?

**Ms Mallon:** That is something that I was keen to do, and, when I took up post, I asked officials to look into it. The reality now is that, given the impact that the pandemic has had on the work of the Department, combined with the limited time left in this mandate, it will not be possible to pass primary legislation. I have asked officials to look at changing the culture in my Department. It is also about changing the policy focus and changing the areas that we invest in. We are trying to do that work and advance all that change where we can, but I hope that my successor, whoever that will be, will continue in that vein and will give positive consideration to an active travel Bill, because it would be hugely beneficial.

**Mr McNulty:** It is one thing getting your picture taken pointing at potholes; it is another matter altogether to get the Sinn Féin Finance Minister to pony up to pay for their repair. Everyone knows that the Sinn Féin Minister holds the purse strings. With your resource budget effectively being a real-terms cut to the infrastructure budget, you have a difficult job balancing competing priorities. Have

you asked the Sinn Féin Finance Minister for more money for those priorities and for the repair of potholes?

**Ms Mallon:** As I outlined in a previous response, the Department's resource outcome is disappointing. That is there for all to see. The Budget outcome is such that not all of even our most high priority or inescapable pressures have been met by a significant margin, and, following successive reducing budgets, the Department has emphasised the extent to which further budget reductions cannot be found without having an impact on public services, including public transport and road maintenance.

I have made the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues aware of the pressures. While I bid for additional money on the Department's £62 million of COVID pressures, I received an allocation of £20 million. Should the remaining pressures not be met in-year, that is likely to impact on the essential services that the Department delivers. However, I will continue to stress the real pressures for our key services and will bid in-year, as I did last year, to improve our services for citizens.

### North-west Transport Hub: Phase 3

5. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the feasibility study on phase 3 work to the railway line from the north-west transport hub to Coleraine. (AQO 2080/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I am ambitious for our rail network and am keen to do all that I can to explore how we progress rail improvements within the limited budgetary envelope that has been made available to us. I also want to ensure that any proposals for changes to the rail network include operational and financial viability and have a clear focus on the part that rail can play in growing the all-island economy, improving the ability of people to connect with and access opportunities and addressing regional imbalance. Rail has huge untapped potential to deliver multiple benefits across our island. I am committed to addressing regional imbalance by improving connectivity to the north-west area. In line with that, I have commissioned a feasibility study to get phase 3 of the Coleraine to Derry project back on track. I have also commissioned additional studies to explore the possibility of a half-hourly service from Derry to Belfast as well as providing additional halts at Ballykelly, Strathfoyle and City of Derry Airport. Work on the phase 3 feasibility study is ongoing, with a number of topographical and pilot studies under way. I continue to work with the campaign group Into the West as we advance that work and keep it moving forward. Rail is key to the future of travel on our island. I will continue to do all that I can to enhance opportunities, particularly for communities that have been left behind for too long.

**Ms Mullan:** Thank you, Minister, for that update. Clearly, investment is needed in the Derry to Coleraine railway line. Will the Minister give me an update on the active travel centre that is meant to be part of the north-west transport hub? I understand that your Department has made an application to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) for funding.

**Ms Mallon:** Thank you. I am keen to increase the proportion of everyday journeys made by walking, cycling and public transport across the North. Enhanced passenger facilities opened in November last year in the

north-west transport hub with the completion of the main station work along with a new 100-space park-and-ride facility. My Department, as you said, has submitted an application for funding for the active and sustainable travel centre from the INTERREG programme to the SEUPB, which has advised that that request for funding is still under consideration. My officials continue to make contact in the hope that we can get the matter positively resolved.

**Mr Middleton:** The Minister will be aware that it is important that we improve rail connectivity to the north-west. The council recently approved a motion to seek your backing, Minister, for a feasibility study into restoring the Londonderry to Portadown rail line. Will you actively support that?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. I have announced a number of feasibility studies on improving connectivity to the north-west. I have also agreed to part fund a feasibility study on the railway line from Portadown to Armagh.

The difficulty is that I have received multiple requests for individual feasibility studies. The Member will know that I am working on a regional strategic transport plan. It is important that we take a strategic approach. That plan will go out for consultation later this year. I encourage Members in the north-west to make representations about rail lines and what they would like to see in the plan. The Member will also know that we have launched the all-island strategic rail review, which will look at rail connectivity across the island and will be data-led. There is a lot of opportunity for people to feed into, shape and dramatically improve our rail infrastructure.

**Mr McCrossan:** Minister, I know that you will agree that our late colleague John Dallat would be proud of the huge amount of work that you have done, the focus and attention that you have put on investing in rail and the reviews that you have established. He was a champion for that for all his life, particularly his public life. You mentioned the review: what will the benefits of that strategic rail review be for the north-west?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. Last month, I was delighted to announce along with Minister Ryan the launch of the strategic all-island rail review. It will explore the opportunities to better connect communities not just in the north-west but much further afield and will open up opportunities for our island economy.

Since coming into office, I have been clear that it is my priority to address regional imbalance, tackle the climate crisis and better connect communities across Ireland.

This review will allow us to consider the rail network across this island and how we can improve it. I look forward to working with colleagues, North and South, as we maximise the opportunities, from rail in particular, to transform travel and opportunities for our citizens who share this island. As I said, the purpose of the review will be to allow data to drive how we improve and expand our rail connections. The process is at an early stage, with a procurement exercise being undertaken to appoint a service provider to deliver the review.

**Mr Speaker:** That ends the period for listed questions. We move to topical questions.

2.30 pm

## Roads: Poor State of Repair

**T1. Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to bid for additional money to bring our roads up to a better standard, given that one of the things that people see when they are driving is the state of the roads, albeit we are coming out of the pandemic, with the potholes and roads that need to be repaired seemingly becoming much worse. (AQT 1331/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. We are seeing years of underinvestment manifested in our road network. The independent Barton report identified an investment requirement of £143 million per annum just to maintain the structural integrity of our roads. The fact that we are not investing that amount is manifest in the form of potholes and a deterioration in the road network. As part of the Budget process, I put in a bid of £120 million for structural maintenance. I recognise that this is a difficulty and a cause of huge frustration to people across Northern Ireland. I will continue to do what I can within the financial constraints to ensure that we are trying to fix our road network. As I have said before in the House, if we do not do the basics right, people find it very difficult to have confidence in us as an Executive. I remain committed to doing what I can. However, I have to be honest about the financial difficulties that my Department is experiencing, given the level of investment that is required in the road network.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Minister for that answer. I accept that there has always been a concern about underinvestment in roads. Now, however, repairers seem to be repairing potholes that were repaired previously. There are safety concerns. There are arbitrary figures for the depth of potholes. On main roads, we now witness people swerving to try to avoid potholes because the roads are in such a bad state. The danger that comes with drivers having to do that feeds into road safety.

Of course, people can put in claims to DFI Roads. In particular areas of our constituencies, we see multiple cases of damage to vehicles, the cost of which, in essence, will be passed on to your Department. Until additional investment is found, what work can you do in the short term to find out where the biggest problem areas are and address those?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. To ensure a consistent approach across Northern Ireland, the Department operates within a matrix and a framework. That is priority-led, so the worst defects get the quickest attention. However, this comes back to the fundamental problem of insufficient funding. As I said, the Barton report identified a requirement of £143 million per annum just to maintain the structural integrity. There has not been that level of funding for many years, so the difficulty that my Department finds itself in is trying to carry out the work that we know is required without having the funds to be able to do it. I will continue to make the case around the Executive table to ensure that we get the funding required so that we can find a way to deal with this. I recognise that patching may work in the first instance but is not the most cost-effective approach in the longer term.

## HGV Restrictions in Clady

T4. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to state what happens next, in light of her announcement today of a public consultation on heavy goods vehicles travelling through Clady village in the heart of his constituency, an issue on which his constituents recently met with her to express their huge concern and, to her credit, she has responded to their calls for help. (AQT 1334/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I know that the Member and his colleague Councillor Edwards have been campaigning strongly on this issue. I thank them for giving me the opportunity to meet residents directly to hear their concerns and how this issue is impacting on them.

As the Member will know, the public consultation in 2019 attracted a number of objections from local businesses that would be adversely affected by the weight restriction. This exemption is intended to reduce that impact. The legislation would prohibit vehicles that exceed 7.5 tons from using the B85 road in Clady from its junction with the Bells Park Road to its junction with the Urney Road. Under the current proposal, there will be exceptions for vehicles that are over the weight restriction that operate within the immediate rural catchment or are delivering to or collecting from properties. The scheme could be introduced later this year, depending on the outcome of the consultation. I encourage everyone locally to share their views in that very short consultation.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Minister for that answer and for her firm commitment to the people of Clady that she is dedicated to resolving the issue. As she is aware, Clady is a very small rural village. It has a narrow street with cars parked outside people's homes, and, when heavy goods lorries come through it to access Donegal, they block the village, which causes considerable issues. Will the Minister reaffirm her support for resolving the issue and give a commitment to the House and the people of Clady that she will do everything within her grasp to see it resolved as swiftly as possible?

**Ms Mallon:** I recognise the importance of the issue. I listened to residents whose homes have been damaged because of the huge vehicles that pass by their homes. We had to consult on the issue. The consultation period is short: it opens on 26 May and closes on 18 June. I encourage the Member and his constituents to respond positively to the consultation. I reiterate the commitment that I gave to the residents when I met them: we will do what we can to move this forward as quickly as possible because the issue has been around for quite some time.

## Roads Recovery Fund: Update

T5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the roads recovery fund, given that she will know that, for anyone representing a rural constituency, potholes are one of the biggest issues that are raised by drivers who are concerned about the condition of rural roads. (AQT 1335/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I recognise — I think that we all do — that there has been historical underinvestment in our road network for a significant number of years and that many rural roads are in need of repair. The Member will know that, in response to that, I allocated £12 million of my

2020-21 capital budget to a roads recovery fund. Of that, £10 million was specifically directed towards rural roads. That funding allowed the targeting of many short stretches of roads that were in particularly poor condition, and it is estimated that over 750 locations on the rural road network will have benefited from it. I am finalising my budget for 2021-22. However, I assure the Member that I remain committed to setting up a further roads recovery fund from the available 2021-22 budget to continue delivering that important work to improve connectivity and help rural communities.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Minister for her comments and welcome them. She will be aware that the 2019 Audit Office's report indicated that fair coverage should be provided for the rural road network from the structural maintenance budget. I raise that with the Minister and ask her to reaffirm her commitment to addressing the issues of potholes and the maintenance of rural roads, which have caused so much havoc for motorists and are serious issues, particularly for those who represent rural areas.

**Ms Mallon:** The Member has made multiple representations about that issue on behalf of his constituents. I am aware of the Northern Ireland Audit Office's report and its recommendations. My officials have undertaken work to implement those recommendations. I am happy to provide a written update to the Member on the specific recommendation that he highlighted.

## Unwanted and Obstructive Parking

T6. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on what her Department is doing to deal with unwanted and obstructive parking in residential areas. (AQT 1336/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for her question. It is really important that we ensure that our roads and streets are made safe for local communities and are accessible for residents. My Department was involved in a residents' parking scheme in the Rugby Road area. A review of that scheme has been undertaken, and I am discussing the findings with officials. There is much value in residents' parking schemes. At times, it is quite difficult to get agreement on them, but there are certainly benefits to be derived from them, and I would like many more to be rolled out across the North.

There is also the issue of enforcement for obstructive parking. Traffic attendants are in place to ensure that, where there is obstructive parking, fines are issued accordingly. We also do a lot of work on the painting of road signs, so we try to come at the issue from a number of perspectives, including from an educational one. We advise people that they need to park responsibly and safely.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Minister for the update. She will be aware that people have been using the Lancaster Street area in our constituency as an unwanted car park. The residents have had their driveways blocked. Indeed, the emergency services have made complaints about not being able to get access for their vehicles and having to go on foot. I know the Minister's position on the matter, but, given that the area is right beside the York Street interchange, will she take this opportunity to assure people who live there and in Henry Street that, before any work on the interchange takes place, she will look at

mitigations and environmental protections, including pest control, parking and all the other issues that residents need to see addressed? Their quality of life has been severely disrupted by the Ulster University development. Construction workers have used the area very carelessly for parking, and some of the traffic wardens are not acquainted with the law.

**Ms Mallon:** I am very much aware of that issue and have asked my officials to arrange for the current road markings in Lancaster Street and Thomas Street to be refreshed and to drop a proposal for I-bar road markings at entrances at McGurks Way, Lancaster Street and Thomas Street in advance of an informal consultation on the matter. The Member has written to me about it, and I have passed on her concerns to Ulster University, because of the issues with construction workers and the parking difficulties presenting as a result.

I also want to reassure her about the York Street interchange. I accepted all the recommendations in full, one of which was on proper consultation and engagement with stakeholders. I am very clear that one of the key stakeholders in the scheme is the local community. I therefore want to make sure that the York Street interchange works for those who will use the road but also for those who live around it. They will be kept up to date, and, of course, I will keep the Member updated as well.

**Mr Speaker:** The next Member is not in his place. I call Paul Frew.

### Housing Development: NI Water Issues

T8. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on progress to resolve problems with NI Water, given the severe blockage to development in the North Antrim constituency and across the Province. (AQT 1338/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I tend to sound like a broken record, but the Member will know and it is a fact that there has been historical underinvestment in our water and waste water infrastructure. That is manifesting itself in the fact that there are over 100 locations that are now at or beyond developmental capacity. It is therefore a huge difficulty. The Utility Regulator has recently ruled on the funding that is required for the next price control period, which is £2 billion of capital investment.

Of course, the difficulty here is that we are still operating from single-year Budgets, which is a big challenge in itself. I will continue to work with my Executive colleagues to ensure that we get the funding that is required in order to deliver on our water and waste water infrastructure so that we can see the economic growth that that will deliver. It will also enable us to build many new homes, because we are badly in need of those as well.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Is there a strategic pathway out of this as to which of the 100 locations that she mentioned should get development funding first? Does she agree that funding in itself will not cure the issue and that we may have to take another look at how NI Water functions and how it is governed?

**Ms Mallon:** The Member asked about prioritisation. There is quite a robust prioritisation process already in place. Northern Ireland Water works with the Utility Regulator and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, and there

is an assessment done of developmental constraints, environmental concerns and water quality. All of that work feeds into the prioritised list of investment that comes forward in the price control period. I assure the Member that a robust process is in place.

Going forward, the fundamental issue is whether one believes that people should be charged for water.

The position of the SDLP and me, as Minister, which is shared by Executive colleagues, is that people should not pay for their water over and beyond what they pay in their rates. If that is our agreed position, we need to ensure that we give the appropriate public funding to enable us to address the historic underinvestment and upgrade the water and waste water infrastructure. We should not always look just at hard engineering solutions, which is why the Living with Water programme in Belfast is really important too.

2.45 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

## Justice

### Speed Indicator Devices

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Justice whether she will consider directing further resources to policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) to enable the roll-out of more speed indicator devices (SIDs). (AQO 2090/17-22)

**Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice):** My Department, in partnership with the Northern Ireland Policing Board, provides annual funding of approximately £4.5 million to the 11 policing and community safety partnerships across Northern Ireland. Following engagement and consultation, PCSPs identify and prioritise local community safety issues to improve community safety, tackle antisocial behaviour and increase confidence in policing. Each PCSP, which is made up of elected, independent and statutory members, then agrees on the appropriate allocation of funding towards programmes that help to address local community safety issues, including road safety.

Over recent years, a number of PCSPs have responded to road safety concerns and provided funding for the purchase and deployment of speed indicator devices to help address those concerns. Given the ongoing priorities in my Department and the constraints on budgets and recognising that road safety sits under the broad policy responsibility of the Department for Infrastructure, the Department of Justice is not in a position to provide additional funding to PCSPs for the express purpose of enabling them to fund more speed indicator devices. However, I am content that, should community demand for local SIDs increase, PCSPs have sufficient flexibility in their action plans and existing budgets to work with PSNI and DFI colleagues to support a further roll-out.

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Minister for her response. Given the importance of road safety, does the Minister agree that speed indicator devices are an effective way to highlight speed awareness?

**Mrs Long:** A joint committee, comprising representatives from my Department and the Northern Ireland Policing Board, oversees the work of PCSPs. All PCSPs provide the joint committee with quarterly PCSP action plan delivery progress reports and are required to use an outcome-based accountability model to measure the effectiveness of the services and interventions that they support. To give a recent example, reports from the Newry, Mourne and Down PSCP for the final quarter of 2020-21 showed that, on average, 10% of motorists reduced their speed due to the presence of the seven speed indicator device signs that were installed across the district at that time. They are, therefore, a useful tool but only as part of the broader panoply of measures to improve road safety outcomes. The data captured by the devices is governed and shared locally with the PCSP, the PSNI, DFI and relevant community organisations. Following analysis, that data is used by the PSNI to identify traffic patterns and informs the deployment of enforcement teams. It can also be beneficial to DFI when it is considering where to place new traffic-calming measures.

**Mr Boylan:** There are complaints about traffic-calming ramps in particular, and speed indicator devices are an alternative measure. Will the Minister undertake to have a conversation with the Infrastructure Minister to ensure that speed indicator devices are rolled out where necessary and appropriate?

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Member for his question. My understanding is that SIDs are not an alternative to traffic-calming measures but can be used by the Department for Infrastructure to identify where traffic-calming measures may be appropriate. However, on the basis that the issue has been raised by members of PCSPs and, indeed, by Members of the Assembly, I have recently written to the Department for Infrastructure and to the Minister, Nichola Mallon, to assess the role that her Department might play in assisting or guiding the appropriate roll-out of SIDs.

**Mr Allister:** Speaking of indicator devices, does the Minister think that she might need a truth indicator device when it comes to the report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), given that a key premise of that report, namely that there was an events company with which the PSNI cooperated, not least on road safety, now turns out to be false? There was no such company, so how can the Minister sustain the position that she welcomes what she called "a comprehensive report"?

**Mrs Long:** To be clear, I need no such device in terms of honesty, integrity or truth. It is fairly clear that the Member in question does not need a shoehorn either, given that he managed to turn that into a question that had nothing to do with the substantive issue.

## Non-fatal Strangulation Offences

2. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the review of the law on non-fatal strangulation offences. (AQO 2091/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** Following the 2019 recommendation from Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland that the Department consider how to address potential inadequacies in the law around strangulation, in summer 2020, I commissioned a review of non-fatal strangulation offences. The review aims to identify and address any inadequacies in the current policy and legislation on

non-fatal strangulation. The scope of the review was later extended to include consideration of the so-called rough sex defence, reflecting the similar legislative consideration given to that issue during the passage of the Westminster Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

My officials have conducted research and taken account of relevant legislative and judicial developments in other jurisdictions locally and internationally. An expert stakeholder reference group was also established to assist with that work. I am pleased to report that the work is at an advanced stage. The review team is now finalising a report for public consultation on non-fatal strangulation offences. The consultation will set out relevant background information and research and seek public and relevant stakeholders' views on the most appropriate way forward for the criminal justice system to respond to cases of non-fatal strangulation. The consultation will be launched in the coming weeks.

**Ms Ennis:** I welcome the Minister's clarification. Obviously, the review of non-fatal strangulation offences is crucial work, and I welcome the work that has been done. Can the Minister confirm whether she anticipates the outcome of the review of non-fatal strangulation offences being reflected in changes to her justice Bill?

**Mrs Long:** The issue of non-fatal strangulation may yet make it into the justice Bill, but, if it does so, it will be as an amendment. There is some discussion of whether that is the most appropriate mechanism. Certainly, the rough sex defence will be dealt with in the justice Bill, at least as a first pass. There are issues, as the Member will be aware, that come into play in non-fatal strangulation and, indeed, in the consent to cause harm. As she will be aware, we want to finish the consultation process before reaching a final conclusion on that.

One of the issues is that, where it is tried as an indictable-only offence, the maximum sentence is a discretionary life sentence. However, in some cases, it is dealt with in the Magistrates' Court, where the maximum sentence for a small number of indictable offences that can be tried summarily in the Magistrates' Court is six to 12 months. I know that at least one member of the judiciary, District Judge McElholm, has raised concerns about the issue of judicial training and the level of the offence and penalty for non-fatal strangulation, all of which we want to consider as part of the review.

## Courthouses: Facility Upgrades

3. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Justice to outline what plans she has to upgrade facilities in courthouses in Newtownards and other towns. (AQO 2092/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** My officials in the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) recently published their modernisation vision statement, which set out ambitious plans to deliver independent, fair and effective modern courts and tribunals to serve the people of Northern Ireland. The document acknowledges that the current estate lacks the flexibility and technological capacity required of a modern justice system and outlines how a more consistent standard of accommodation will be delivered through evidence-based asset management and investment.

In spite of the obvious delays in construction that have been caused by the pandemic, my officials in the Courts and Tribunals Service have continued to manage improvements in buildings right across Northern Ireland, with investments, both strategic and tactical, comprising smaller-scale maintenance works and larger capital projects. This year, our energy efficiency upgrade will continue with projects on site at Downpatrick, Ballymena, Coleraine and Armagh and others progressing through the design and procurement stages. More than 40 courtrooms across the NICTS estate have been upgraded to install modern audio and videoconferencing technology that allows remote and hybrid hearings and facilitates the digital display of evidence. The courtroom technology programme was essential in allowing courts to continue throughout the pandemic and will continue in the coming months, further increasing access to justice and boosting digital capability.

In relation to Newtownards, plans are well advanced to upgrade and replace all windows at the building. That project will address long-standing maintenance issues and improve energy efficiency. It is anticipated that works will commence over the summer months. The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service will continue to take forward a range of improvement works to ensure that courts and tribunal buildings are fit for purpose and can support the delivery of physical, virtual and hybrid services.

**Miss McIlveen:** I thank the Minister for her answer, and I welcome the improvement works that she has announced, in particular those for Newtownards courthouse. Can I seek an assurance from the Minister that it is not her intention to rationalise the estate any further, particularly Newtownards courthouse, as her party colleague who previously held the portfolio had suggested, given the need for services such as these in our smaller towns?

**Mrs Long:** It is widely recognised that many of the buildings in the court estate are not fit for purpose, with most old, a number listed and some, even with investment, not able to meet the standards that people have the right to expect. That does not mean that there are existing plans to close any buildings at this stage. There is no court closure list. Instead, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service has completed a comprehensive technical survey of the entire estate that will provide the data necessary to make informed investment decisions over the next five to 10 years. An estate strategy and strategic asset management plan are under development. Those documents will set out how the physical estate will support the full range of NICTS business and the investment that will be required. That strategy will be subject to engagement with all stakeholders, including elected representatives.

**Mr Chambers:** Following the welcome refurbishments of numerous courts around Northern Ireland, can the Minister confirm how many cases in the backlog caused by COVID that investment has helped to clear?

**Mrs Long:** It would not be possible to link particular cases and numbers with the work that we have done. However, if we look at what we have been able to do, I can perhaps outline the work that has been done and then a bit about progress on recovery.

Forty-four courtrooms have been upgraded to date, and over £1 million has been spent on courtroom technology.

We have also included remote working facilities maximised, where 300 laptops and Wi-Fi-enabled PCs have been provided to staff not only to allow them to work in places in the courthouse where they do not have network points but to facilitate working from home. We have also included the Nightingale accommodation in the International Convention Centre to allow Coroners' Court hearings, tribunal business and welfare appeals, small claims courts, pre-hearing consultation space and jury assembly to free up some of the room that we have in Laganside Court. There are also now 66 Sightlink licences and 17 Webex licences in operation across the court facility to allow us to have both hybrid and virtual hearings. We have also installed 27 additional videoconferencing units in courtrooms.

### 3.00 pm

Prior to the COVID lockdown, there were around 8,100 criminal cases in the court system. With the closure of courts over the first lockdown, that number rose to approximately 12,800 cases by early September last year. With the reopening of most courts since August 2020, more Magistrates' Court cases have been disposed of by the courts than received, so the real-time management information suggests that we now have a caseload of around 10,500. Children Order cases are being dealt with at a rate that exceeds pre-lockdown levels by around 20%. However, as Members are aware, I have made a bid for court recovery as part of the budget plans, and I am hopeful that that will be received positively by the Department of Finance.

**Mr Blair:** My question has just been asked, but I will keep trying.

**Ms Brogan:** I thank the Minister for her answers so far. For how long does she anticipate the Nightingale courts will continue to be used?

**Mrs Long:** We have a contract that takes us up to the end of June. However, we continue to be in discussions with the management of the centre about potentially carrying on with our use of the building through the summer. Much will depend on the relaxations and whether conferencing business will be able to restart. However, given the strictures around travel regulations, international conferencing in particular may still be in quite a depleted state, come that point, so the management may welcome a tenant that stays through the summer. Obviously, we will keep Members informed of changes.

**Mr McCrossan:** Thank you, Minister, for the answers to your questions so far. Pre-COVID, the courts estate was used for appeals for people going through the benefits process. Does the Minister believe that that is an appropriate use of the estate, and does she consider that it is up to date enough to ensure disability access given that there are heavy doors, no real automatic door opening and difficulty parking?

**Mrs Long:** The Member set out clearly what I referenced in my answer to Miss McIlveen, which was that the courts estate often falls short of the high standards we wish to have because they are old, historic buildings. Very often, they are listed; therefore, we cannot make changes.

It is, of course, appropriate that the tribunal cases should be heard within the Courts and Tribunals Service because that is not just a courts service but includes tribunals. It is

important that that happens. We have extensive plans for modernisation, and one of the first, big pieces that we are looking at will be to provide a modern facility in the north-west so that we can match the kind of facilities that we have been able to provide in the greater Belfast area.

### Victims' Payment Scheme: British Government Funding

4. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any engagements she has had with the Northern Ireland Office, or other representatives of the British Government, regarding their contribution to funding for the victims' payment scheme. (AQO 2093/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** The Minister of Finance is leading on engagement with the UK Government on behalf of the Executive on funding for the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. However, in addition to participating in meetings involving the First Minister, deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister, I have raised the issue separately with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on a number of occasions at meetings and in correspondence.

The most recent meeting with the Secretary of State relating to the scheme was held on 7 April 2021. I attended that meeting with the First Minister, deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister. The meeting was arranged following an offer made by the Secretary of State to provide access to £100 million of New Decade, New Approach funding for the financial years 2022-23 to 2025-26, which is when the financial pressures of the scheme on the Executive are expected to be greatest. The Secretary of State indicated that no further funding would be made available for the scheme. However, he agreed to a further meeting later this year when more detailed information would be available on the profile of applications to the scheme, which would inform more accurate estimates of cost.

On the basis of the estimated costs of the scheme, we expressed strongly to the Secretary of State our collective position that the offer of financial support falls considerably short of what was expected and that the UK Government would need to provide additional funding in order to avoid such a financial strain on the Northern Ireland block grant. I also raised concerns about the impact on funding for proposed legacy arrangements if the funding was being diverted from that set aside for the arrangements envisaged in New Decade, New Approach.

Discussions with the Secretary of State and the UK Government will continue. In the meantime, an undertaking has been provided to the courts that payments will be made to successful applicants under the scheme. That is important reassurance to victims that payments will be made when they fall due under the terms of the scheme, regardless of where the funding comes from.

**Ms Dillon:** I thank the Minister for her answer. It is important that victims know that, regardless of what discussions are ongoing or what arguments there are with the British Government over who should pay, they will receive their money.

Minister, will you outline whether you have had any discussions with or approaches from the Secretary of State or the British Government about their proposed

legacy Bill, as outlined in the Queen's Speech, given that, effectively, it gives an amnesty to British state forces and rules out the possibility of any type of article 2-compliant investigations?

**Mrs Long:** I think that the Secretary of State has contacted the leaders of all the Executive parties to discuss the proposals that he intends to bring forward. As a party, the Alliance Party met the Secretary of State on two occasions, and I anticipate a further meeting in the days ahead. As Justice Minister, I have met the Secretary of State on one occasion specifically to discuss the impact on the justice system. I have also told my officials that they are free to continue to engage with his officials on the workability of any proposals that he may bring forward. However, I make it clear that I do not intend, as the leader of the Alliance Party or as the Justice Minister, to be involved in the co-design of any scheme that will lead to a full amnesty or disrupt the outworking of the justice system as anticipated under article 2.

**Mr Beattie:** I thank the Minister for the work that her Department has done on the permanent disablement payment scheme. It is really appreciated. Does the Minister believe that payments will start to be made in this financial year?

**Mrs Long:** It is a very positive development that the president of the board has indicated his intention that the scheme will open from 30 June. It is a complex scheme, and a number of operational issues, including the design of the medical assessment service by Capita, are being progressed in advance of its opening for applications.

It will be for the Victims' Payments Board to confirm when payments may be made from the scheme, but that will depend on the number of applications, their complexity and so on. However, I am aware that the president and members of the Victims' Payments Board are committed to ensuring that applications are processed as expeditiously as possible under the regulations. I expect that more complete applications, which require less assessment, may well come to fruition in the current financial year.

**Mr McGrath:** Does the Minister agree that it would make sense for our Executive Office and Ministers to have an agreed position on trying to work with the British Government to get funds? As I understand it, they have not had any joint engagement with the British Government about the funding of the programme.

**Mrs Long:** As I stated in earlier answers, the First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with the Finance Minister and me, have, in fact, met the UK Government to discuss those issues. As an Executive, we have a collective position that the UK Government need to continue to make more significant contributions.

**Mr McGrath:** That is not what I asked.

**Mrs Long:** You said that they had had no engagement; they did.

**Mr McGrath:** *[Inaudible]* British Government.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for the detail that she has given thus far about the victims' payment scheme. Some victims will have died before being able to make an application to the scheme. Sadly, others will pass away before it becomes operational. What provision is in place to deal with those victims?



**Mrs Long:** I thank the Member for his question. First, I will return to the previous question, because the Member seems to be dissatisfied with my response. The UK Government are represented in the negotiations by the Northern Ireland Office, which is part of the UK Cabinet. Therefore, when the First Minister and deputy First Minister engage with the Northern Ireland Office, they are engaging with the UK Government. That is the answer to the question that was asked. Furthermore, the Finance Minister is engaging with Treasury on the matter. Therefore, it is being addressed at all appropriate levels of the UK Government.

There is provision in the board's regulations for victims who passed away in the interim and were unable to benefit from claims. First, applicants can nominate a beneficiary to receive a payment should they die after submitting an application. Also, the board can decide whether someone may apply to receive such a payment in the event that no one has been nominated. Further, the regulations allow for posthumous applications. As such, they will ensure that, in cases in which an individual who was entitled to a victims' payment but passed away before being able to make an application, that application may be made by a person whom the deceased could have nominated under the regulations.

**Mr Speaker:** The next two Members are not in their place.

### DOJ Budget: Underspend

7. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice why her Department has had an underspend on its budget for the last three financial years. (AQO 2096/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** The Department of Justice manages the third-largest non-ring-fenced resource DEL budget across the Northern Ireland Departments, behind Health and Education, and has an annual budget of approximately £1.1 billion. In the Department, there are three core directorates, five executive agencies and eight executive non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), including the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The Department manages a range of volatile and demand-led services, such as the payment of legal aid costs, and criminal damage and criminal injuries compensation payments.

Relative to the size and nature of the budget, the Department has successfully managed to minimise underspends in each of the last three years to around 1% of the total final in-year non-ring-fenced resource DEL budget and to around 3% to 4% of the capital DEL budget. The underspends, based on the final out-turn from the three financial years 2017-18 to 2019-2020, were non-ring-fenced resource DEL of £4.3 million, £5.8 million and £8.9 million, which equates to 0.4%, 0.6% and 0.8% of the final budget. Capital DEL underspends for the same years were £1.6 million, £3.2 million and £2.9 million, which equates to 2.8%, 3.5% and 3.7% of the final budget. Final out-turn figures for 2020-21 will be available later this year.

A significant area of underspend in non-ring-fenced resource DEL each year relates to compensation services and the settlement of claims for criminal damage and personal injury payments. Those payments are particularly difficult to manage due to the uncertainty about timing and value. The underspends in this area have been £2.2 million, £3 million and £5.6 million respectively. Capital DEL underspends are mostly attributable to delays in

projects across the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and policing.

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Minister for her answer. What processes are in place to ensure that your Department spends its budget to the best of its ability and offers the best value?

**Mrs Long:** The Department always seeks to minimise underspends, and it works very closely with the Department of Finance during monitoring rounds and the year-end process. The Department has successfully delivered underspends for non-ring-fenced resource DEL and capital DEL to within acceptable levels for the past three years due to effective budget management. Underspends have largely been achieved by a continual process of keeping budgets under review and by taking part in the in-year monitoring process run by the Department of Finance. That is the opportunity to address formally pressures in-year and declare reduced requirements at each stage of the process.

**Mr Speaker:** The next three Members are not in their places. I call Maurice Bradley.

### HMP Magilligan: Redevelopment

11. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice whether the outline business case (OBC) for the redevelopment of HMP Magilligan has been submitted. (AQO 2100/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** The OBC 1 for the redevelopment of the Magilligan site will be submitted to the financial services division within the next two months.

**Mr M Bradley:** I thank the Minister for that very short but definite answer. It is good news.

**Mr Speaker:** More good news: short answers to short questions. I call Gary Middleton. Gary Middleton is not in his place. Mark Durkan is not in his place. Daniel McCrossan is in his place; you get a bonus.

### Serious Sexual Offence Cases

14. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her plans to enhance the existing protocol to expedite serious sexual offence cases involving children under 13 years. (AQO 2103/17-22)

**Mr McCrossan:** Mr Speaker, since the Assembly returned, all 14 questions have never been asked. Well done, Minister.

**Mrs Long:** I am committed to implementing the full programme of reforms under the Gillen review into law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland and to improve the experience of victims of these horrendous offences. I particularly recognise the vulnerability of victims who are children. Therefore, my officials are establishing a cross-departmental steering group to provide strategic direction and oversee the coordinated implementation of the Gillen review recommendations specific to providing support to child victims of serious sexual offences.

One priority for the group in 2021-22 is to oversee the development of a permanent protocol to extend and build on the judge-led voluntary protocol to expedite serious sexual offence cases involving children aged under 13

years, which began in Belfast in September 2019. A dedicated working group is also being established to make arrangements for the incremental roll-out of the protocol to one additional Crown Court within this financial year and across all other Crown Court areas in Northern Ireland thereafter. The judge-led protocol will continue to operate in tandem while that work is ongoing.

### 3.15 pm

Work to extend the protocol is just one element of the programme of work that the steering group will oversee. We anticipate that a number of other work streams will be established to take forward the implementation of other recommendations under the Gillen review, including the development of a pilot scheme to provide publicly funded, independent legal advice specifically for children, mirroring the sexual offences legal advice pilot that my Department launched last month for adult victims; work to pilot and test arrangements for pre-recorded cross-examination and re-examination in serious sexual offence cases involving child victims; and, finally, the consideration of a Barnahus-type model for Northern Ireland, which would bring all justice and therapeutic child services under a single roof. Those additional work streams will complement work that is already under way on, for example, delivering improvements on achieving best evidence and providing remote evidence centres, where children can provide evidence away from the court building.

**Mr McCrossan:** The Minister gave a very detailed answer and answered my supplementary question in the body of that answer. Thank you.

**Mr Speaker:** That ends the period for listed questions. Before we move on to topical questions, I make the point that I will be writing to all Members who were not in their place today. That includes a number of Members who were supposed to be attending remotely. Departments and Ministers put a lot of work into responding to questions that are asked. There has been a recurring theme of Members not being present in the Chamber to ask their question, and there has recently been an increase in that happening. I will be writing to all those Members to make sure that they are in their place in future.

We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

### Hospital and Emergency Service Staff: Safety at Work

T1. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice whether she is minded to review the sentencing guidelines for incidents that involve attacks on staff in our hospitals and on those emergency service staff who have been called to the aid of the general public, given that, over the past few months, there have been many reports of attacks on our emergency service staff, even though they have gone above and beyond the call of duty during the pandemic and deserve to feel safe in their place of work. (AQT 1341/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Member for his question. It is an issue that the First Minister has raised with me. She had asked that we look at the issue of first responders and others who may come into contact with the public and be attacked in their line of work. Under the sentencing review that was undertaken, we gave consideration to the issue, and we are minded to look specifically at that area. As I

have indicated previously, my intention is to bring forward a comprehensive sentencing Bill in the next mandate. Preparation on that will commence in the autumn, and it will be for whoever is Justice Minister from next May to consider whether it is also a priority for them.

**Mr M Bradley:** I thank the Minister for her detailed answer. It was a wee bit longer than the last one. All that remains for me to say is that I look forward to the review coming back. Stiffer sentences are the way in which to encourage support. It will be a big bonus for the people who work in the emergency services to know that, if they are attacked, the offender will get a just sentence.

**Mrs Long:** Sentencing remains a matter for the judiciary. It has largely been our approach in the Department to look towards setting the maximum limit at the right level so that, as judges have unfettered discretion, they are nevertheless aware of the seriousness of the offence that they are taking forward. In this case, our intention is to look at those people who, in the line of their work, may be attacked in that way as an aggravator for any sentencing so that it would be seen as an aggravated offence if the person were a first responder.

### Police Officers: NDNA Commitment

T2. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Justice what progress is being made on the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment of 7,500 new police officers. (AQT 1342/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** As the Member will be aware, there were lengthy discussions on that issue as the Budget was being set for next year. At one stage, there was concern that, owing to the removal of Brexit funding from Westminster, and a number of other issues, including the flat-cash budget that the Department got, we would end up in a situation in which we had a reduction in police numbers. That would have been very unhelpful. Thanks, however, to some hard work done by the Department of Justice and other Executive colleagues who took a particular interest in the matter, including the Member's former party leader, we have been able to secure additional resource: first, to secure at 7,000 officers the complement of the PSNI at the moment and, secondly, to allow the PSNI to start to recruit an additional 100 officers this year. It will be a matter for future Budgets to ensure that that is baselined and built upon. We have made some progress. It is not as much as any of us would have liked, but, given the current financial situation, it is commendable that we are at least able to start moving in the right direction as opposed to regressing, which may have been the case previously.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for that answer. The Storey funeral and the events surrounding it have clearly caused reputational damage to the PSNI. The barrister-led inquiry at City Hall and the report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) have not provided the clarity and certainty that the general public require. Does the Minister believe that a judge-led independent inquiry would be helpful and provide the clarification and certainty that the public need and give them confidence in the PSNI again?

**Mrs Long:** It is a big step to suggest that there is not general confidence in the PSNI. From dealing with the public and talking to the people who I engage with at constituency level and as a Minister, that is not my

experience. Increasing confidence in the PSNI is all of our responsibility as elected representatives. Where there are issues, we ought to engage constructively with the PSNI and with communities to build confidence. I am yet to see a substantive reason for any kind of judge-led inquiry. I am clear that I will not cross the boundary of trying to usurp the role of the Policing Board, which has the authority and responsibility for scrutiny of the PSNI. Many of the issues that have been raised about gaps in the HMIC, and in particular its report, do not pertain to HMIC and were never part of its remit. However, if the Policing Board and its members have questions about those matters, they are free to raise those with the Chief Constable and seek a response. Indeed, they could go down the route of commissioning their own inquiry into those matters. That would allow them to get to the detail that they need about the policing operation.

With respect to the report from Belfast City Council, it is well outside my jurisdiction, these days, to comment on Belfast City Council, much as Members and, indeed, the Speaker may have done in the past.

### **Bobby Storey Funeral: Security and Stewarding**

T3. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Justice, if Island Events did not provide security and stewarding services at the Bobby Storey funeral, to state who did, given that she will be well aware of the continued public outcry in relation to the funeral fiasco. (AQT 1343/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** I will say first that I understand the real hurt and frustration that many people still feel about the events surrounding that funeral. I am especially mindful of those who lost loved ones during the pandemic and that many of them were hurt by the fact that, whilst they stuck to the rules, others did not. I am very conscious that Mr Storey, too, has a grieving family and that, every time that this is raised, that has an impact on them. We need to proceed sensitively when we deal with these issues.

Questions about who provided the security and stewarding for the funeral are simply not a matter for me, as Justice Minister. I have no locus in matters that are the operational responsibility of the Chief Constable, and I must respect his operational independence. The Northern Ireland Policing Board, as the PSNI's accountability body, will receive a written response from the Chief Constable on the findings of the inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS). The Board can ask further questions if areas of uncertainty remain. The Chief Constable has already indicated that he is happy to address any questions that the board wishes to put to him.

**Mr Harvey:** The entire justice system has suffered serious reputational damage from its handling of all this. What further investigation will you, as Justice Minister, direct to answer this particular question?

**Mrs Long:** There is no doubt that the decisions of both the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) around that event were the subject of intense public interest. The mechanisms that govern the operation of the justice system are designed to ensure that operational decisions are kept free of political interference, including interference by the Justice Minister. Under the tripartite accountability arrangements, the Policing Board is the key accountability

mechanism for the PSNI; it is not the Justice Minister and it is not, with due respect to the House, the Assembly. The board comprises a balance of political representatives and independent members who are collectively tasked with ensuring an effective, efficient, impartial, representative and accountable Police Service that will secure the confidence of the whole community.

The Public Prosecution Service is also reviewing its decision. Given that the PPS is operationally independent of me, as Justice Minister, I will, quite rightly, play no role whatsoever in that process. Until such times as those processes are fully worked through and exhausted, it would be premature to consider whether there are sufficient substantive issues as to require any further action on my part.

### **Loyalist Communities Council: Threat of Violence**

T4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Justice, after acknowledging her acknowledgement of the grief experienced by Bobby Storey's family each time that the subject of his funeral is raised, albeit it is clear that those who raise the subject do not care about Bobby's family and are using the grief of others, who were hurt by the events around the funeral, as a political football and should be ashamed of themselves, whether she will join him in condemning the comments made by representatives of the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) at Westminster last week, when they, once again, threatened the use of violence. (AQT 1344/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** I have no hesitation in condemning any group or organisation that suggests that violence is still a way to further its political objectives. Violence should never be on the table, it should never have been on the table and it should be firmly off the table today. People who make those comments do so recklessly and without thought to the people affected. Today, we have talked about victims, about legacy and about the hurt of grieving families, and every time that people threaten violence, it is those people and people like them who will be affected in the future if that comes to pass. I ask people — seriously — to de-escalate some of the language that they use around these issues. It is neither helpful to their cause nor appropriate in what is meant to be a lawful society.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Minister, is it not the case that those political parties that meet the LCC give that group a status that it does not deserve? While I wholly recognise that everyone should make efforts to encourage groups to disarm and disband, meeting these groups in common cause for political objective is the wrong way forward, and the only item on the agenda — not the first item and not the last item — for these meetings should be this: when are you disbanding?

**Mrs Long:** I am on record previously saying that it is the only question on which I would be willing to engage with the LCC, because until loyalist paramilitarism has ended and until those organisations that are involved with it and any other paramilitary organisation have gone away, we will not have a normal society. It is completely unacceptable for the coercive control structures of any illegal organisation to still operate in our society, and it is incumbent on unionist politicians, nationalist politicians and all of us to make clear statements in that regard and

to follow it through with our actions. I have no difficulty whatsoever in engaging with the loyalist community, but I refuse — I refuse — to equate the loyalist community with loyalist terrorists.

### Justice Bill: Executive Delay

T5. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Justice, in the light of the fact that the Justice Committee is waiting to receive a Bill from the Department of Justice, which should have come from the Executive a number of weeks ago, to outline whether a specific party in the Executive is causing the delay, given that all the parties represented on the Committee have stated that they want the Bill to proceed. (AQT 1345/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Member for her question. Drafting of the justice Bill is complete, and the Bill contains important provisions that will protect people from serious sexual offences and sexual exploitation. On 27 April, I circulated a paper to Executive colleagues for approval of the introduction of the Bill. Despite, as the Member said, the content of the Bill being widely supported, I was unsuccessful in my attempts to get approval of the Bill onto the agenda for Executive meetings on 6 May, 13 May and 20 May, when it was tabled but for discussion only. I have written, without success, to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on three separate occasions in an effort to progress introduction of the Bill. As yet, I have not been able to determine any substantive reason why that is the case.

The content of the Bill, as it is now drafted, was approved by the Executive on 19 November 2020, and no new content has been added in the interim. I am growing increasingly concerned that any further delay will see the Bill fail to progress in this mandate and that, as a result, there will be a gap in the public protection arrangements for the most vulnerable in our society.

That is especially true, because I will not then be able to progress planned amendments to, for example, abolish the rough-sex defence, which I was questioned about today, extend the existing revenge porn provisions to include a threat of publication or widen the scope of and strengthen the current law on the abuse of trust. Those are public protection issues. They should not be controversial. I have spoken briefly, in the Executive, to the new leader of the DUP, in the hope that we will be able to meet before this Thursday's Executive meeting to seek clarity on the issues about which the concerns lie and to get the Bill cleared so that we can move forward.

### 3.30 pm

**Mr Speaker:** We have time for only a very brief supplementary question. Please be as brief as possible.

**Ms Dillon:** Thank you, Minister. As you said, there are a number of issues in the justice Bill that we want to see come forward, in particular about the protection of victims of sexual and domestic violence. We need to see that happen. If a party is blocking that in the Executive, we need to know, because that is not being articulated in the Committee. We need a response in order to move the matter forward.

**Mrs Long:** I accept the urgency of the issue. I have been as blunt about it as the Member knows that I am capable of

being. I am clear that those who are holding the Bill up do not object to the Bill's content, as drafted. Their concerns are about potential amendments that may be tabled once the Bill comes to the Committee or is in front of the House. I raised the issue a number of times in the Executive when it came to other Bills. I was told firmly, by the same individuals, that it was not the business of the Executive to try to constrain what might be moved on the Floor of the House. Therefore, it would be quite a change of direction if they were to try to do so.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up. Members may take their ease before the next item of business.

**Mr Carroll:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I was not in my place for Question Time. Business moved far more quickly than I anticipated. I place on record my apologies to you and to the House that I was not in my place.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Mr Carroll.

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

## Private Members' Business

### Green New Deal

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly recognises that recovery from the pandemic and tackling the climate crisis go hand in hand, requiring an investment-led, green recovery that delivers on social and economic justice and rapidly decarbonises our economy; and calls on the Executive to deliver a green new deal that will create an equitable, sustainable economy filled with well-paid, secure, low-carbon jobs in care, education and health as well as in industry and infrastructure, and to ensure well-being and inclusion are at the centre of government decision-making. — [Mr Blair.]*

**Mr Durkan:** I apologise to the House for missing my question to the Justice Minister during Question Time.

We can all agree that the past year, while being a terrible time, has been a wake-up call for us all. In being forced to do things differently, we learned that we must do things differently. The pandemic has upended society, but it has also allowed people to re-evaluate how they live and work, take stock of the natural environment and consider their consumption habits, and it has served to expedite the public desire for green recovery. That is where our focus needs to be.

Rebuilding in the wake of COVID-19 demands that we build back better, with green, sustainable principles at the heart of the decision-making process. The pandemic has instigated a gear shift in global consumption habits: people are shopping more mindfully and eco-consciously, and demand for local and sustainable products is on the rise. Attitudes have changed, and those changes are here to stay. We must respond and ensure that a green recovery not only shapes policy but defines our towns and cities for decades to come.

As I outlined during the recent debate on the Climate Change Bill, environmental challenges present economic opportunity; the two are not mutually exclusive. Research has shown that the cost savings of decarbonisation will bear fruit by 2050. As such, going green makes positive economic sense. While the green revolution is regarded with apprehension by some, it is undoubtedly a vehicle for prosperity.

Achieving the target of net zero emissions by 2050 demands action at all levels, but, perhaps most crucially, we need to see change in our industrial processes and in our energy sector. The energy sector must set its sights on a long-term collaborative plan. The North has exceeded renewable energy targets thus far, with almost half of our electricity being generated from renewable sources. However, we cannot fall into a trap of complacency. We must build on our relative success and look towards a viable long-term renewable energy plan that provides security of supply, ensures affordable renewable energy for all consumers and looks towards decarbonisation. The rapidly growing renewable sector has the potential to create thousands of jobs here, guaranteeing the improved health of our economy and environment.

The financial and practical benefits of a shift towards clean energies are clear. That is why governments everywhere are investing in renewable industries. There is no greater investment than the protection of our environment. We must act now to implement initiatives and energy strategies that guarantee that. We need a new vision if we hope to achieve climate action targets.

A collaborative cross-border approach is vital, as is a wider joined-up effort with Europe. It is important to remember that having a carbon-free energy sector will not happen overnight. It is a process that requires commitment and a change in attitude from our politicians, energy suppliers and businesses. While I welcome the Department for the Economy's ongoing work to develop an energy strategy for Northern Ireland, it is regrettable that Minister Dodds has failed to ride the wave of change, proposing just £20 million to stimulate green recovery in her economic recovery plan. In the wider scheme of things, particularly when we consider that Scotland has invested almost 10 times that amount, that is a drop in the ocean.

While Minister Dodds has reasserted her Department's commitment to achieve net zero emissions from energy by 2050, I am seriously concerned about whether the steps or time frames suggested are adequate to achieve that. A lot has been assumed about the role of hydrogen and biofuels in providing a revolution in energy systems, but, in our view, there is too little focus on energy sources such as geothermal, which is widely used elsewhere.

All Departments have a role. One key area is retrofitting homes in the social and private housing sectors. Experts have lauded the creation of energy-efficient homes as a necessity in tackling the climate emergency. Considering that 27% of emissions are from domestic sources, investment in that area cannot be an option; rather, it is a necessity. By retrofitting, not only will we make our homes more energy-efficient and cost-effective but we will create crucial well-paid, skilled jobs and tackle fuel poverty.

The transport sector, which has significant carbon emissions, has grasped that opportunity and has committed to transitioning to an entirely renewable energy fleet by 2050. The Infrastructure Minister, Nichola Mallon, has —.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his comments to a conclusion

**Mr Durkan:** Every facet of society must do things differently. Supported by the right strategy, we can deliver change in a manner that will not just help address the environmental challenges but bring about significant economic and societal benefit for all. We support the motion.

**Dr Aiken:** The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion. How could anybody in the Assembly not support the motion and its sentiments? Plagiarism is the sincerest form of flattery, and I am glad to see so many of the Ulster Unionist Party's policies being brought into it.

There are some significant issues that we need to address, particularly in Northern Ireland. There are some decisions that we have to make, and those decisions have to be made now. In particular, when we move towards an all-electric economy, we need to sort out issues in our grid system and our electricity supply system. Over time, other Members have addressed this issue several times.

My party has real concerns about the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) and Northern Ireland Electricity Energy (NIE Energy), or should I say Eirgrid and the Electricity Supply Board (ESB), and their approach to supporting infrastructure in Northern Ireland. Indeed, there is also concern about whether the Department for the Economy is up for the task of transforming our electrical grid system and the market to allow us get to net zero carbon by 2050.

As we move towards the UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), Northern Ireland needs to address some significant issues. We are pleased to see the issues around just transition. It is clear that our agribusiness, particularly agriculture and farmers, will need support as they move towards net zero carbon by 2050. Indeed, as pointed out by the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), many other areas of our economy, including small and medium enterprises, will need support to do that.

As other contributors said, this also represents a significant opportunity. In particular, we have the ability to transform our housing stock so that it not only gets closer to Passivhaus level but becomes self-generating to as large a degree as possible. We have seen what has happened across the rest of Europe, particularly the Netherlands and Denmark, which are models of what Northern Ireland should be looking to achieve. However, that requires significant changes to our planning processes. We have to ensure that we incentivise making housing much more efficient so that we make it easy to get to that point. We also need to be able to set incentives for Northern Ireland businesses, particularly those in the construction sector, to get involved in the major housing projects that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive will, I hope, be working on. Those projects will help us move towards net zero carbon.

We heard today from the Infrastructure Minister, and significant areas of infrastructure will need to be updated to secure net zero. We heard about transport, but one of the things about being on an island is that we also need to consider how we can incentivise offshore energy and offshore wind farms that meet the requirement in Northern Ireland. It is regrettable that, in the past, significant opportunities for offshore wind farms were not taken. If you look across the Irish Sea, you will see that everywhere in English, Welsh and Scottish waters seems to be festooned by offshore wind farms. In the waters off Northern Ireland and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland, there are very few. At the moment, it is beginning to look like we are being left behind. We must make sure that Northern Ireland is part of the all-islands renewable energy market, and that will have to involve a significant use of offshore wind.

We have talked a lot about the hydrogen economy and how it links in. However, to make it work, we have to incentivise it. One of the problems in Northern Ireland is the complete lack of joined-up government. We should be asking ourselves this question: are the Department for the Economy, the Department for Infrastructure and the Executive Office up to the challenges to make sure that we move towards a green recovery and net zero carbon by 2050?

Finally, as I draw my remarks to an end, this is also about how we get out of COVID-19. At this stage, we should all pay our greatest respects to the health workers of Northern

Ireland, who have done such a fantastic job to get us to the point at which we now look positively to the future.

The message with which I want to end my remarks is that, if we are to achieve this, we must have a fully joined-up approach across the Government. It is down to all parties, and we must ask ourselves this fundamental question: are the Department for the Economy, the Department for Infrastructure and the Executive Office currently up to the task? We need to make sure that they are, and, as an Assembly, we need to hold them to account.

**Mr Irwin:** The opening part of the motion states:

*“recovery from the pandemic and tackling the climate crisis go hand in hand”.*

I caution that, in the immediate term, for most people in the Province, given the massive pressures of the past year, the tragic deaths from COVID and the many hospitalisations, recovery from the pandemic is very much the most pressing and main priority at this time, and it should be the main priority for the House.

That said, Northern Ireland must do its fair share in response to climate change.

As I have said in the House previously, actions should be reflective of and, ultimately, proportionate to our 0.04% overall contribution to global emissions.

### 3.45 pm

Plunging the people of Northern Ireland into further financial strain and upheaval with bad legislation on climate change will not make for any meaningful improvement. I refer, of course, to the private Member's Bill on climate change, and I use this further opportunity to urge Members instead to put their weight behind Minister Poots's departmental Bill.

Aspects of a green recovery that make common sense should, of course, be rapidly enacted. I see, for example, much room for improvement to the existing social housing stock and the need for those homes to receive much-needed energy-efficient upgrades. That should have an immediate cost-saving benefit to tenants and also benefit the climate. I have lost count of the calls that I have received from Housing Executive tenants who feel that their homes are not efficient, which has had a real and concerning impact on their finances. The House has a responsibility to deal with that issue in a meaningful way. It could be dealt with using the right intervention.

We can read the headlines on future energy sources and moves away from gas boilers, but we cannot ignore the reality of what that means for thousands of homeowners in Northern Ireland. Putting in new technology will be a massive expense for homeowners. To achieve that will require a clear and sensible pathway and will need a significant level of financial support for homeowners.

New forms of heating technology are expensive, and to install them requires a significant outlay. Take the RHI scheme, for example. Some participants spent many thousands of pounds on the installation costs of the new technology. Of course, currently, wood pellets remain an expensive source of heat. We have a situation now in which the tariff is nowhere near enough to subsidise either the massive outlay in installation costs or the cost of the fuel compared with fossil fuel alternatives. We need to get

that issue right. Bad policy decisions will see millions of pounds returned to the Treasury that would otherwise be used to subsidise sources of green energy. It will not help our overall emissions-lowering agenda either. Businesses having to revert to using fossil fuels is not a good outcome for climate improvement.

The electric vehicle market requires much work. One only has to watch the television to see that many car manufacturers are vying for a slice of that market. There is no doubt, of course, that we are set to increase our use of electric vehicles over those that run on petrol or diesel. However, the charging network for electric vehicles remains abysmal in Northern Ireland. Despite many approaches to the Infrastructure Minister on that topic and, indeed, to many others in the House, there fails to be a clear, concise and meaningful strategy for creating and increasing the roll-out of such infrastructure. Indeed, it was disheartening when a constituent contacted me earlier in the year to say that 50% of the electric vehicle charging network in Newry was faulty. The effect of that was that the driver was nervous about using the electric vehicle for fear of being out of range of a working charging point.

Those are the physical aspects of the green recovery that need to be sorted out. We need to get them right, right now, if we are to make meaningful progress. For the vast majority of consumers out there, one of the most easily recognisable products of green energy is the electric car, yet, here in Northern Ireland, the network cannot possibly respond to the market. It is nowhere near where it needs to be. That must change immediately.

The green recovery must involve actions that are sound investments of public money and policy decisions that balance the need for a climate response but, crucially, do not throw our economic future over a cliff edge.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a conclusion.

**Mr Irwin:** In Northern Ireland, we are uniquely placed to make an important contribution to the green economy and, especially, the green recovery, given that most electricity consumption here was derived from renewables in 2020, and that was an improvement on the previous year.

**Mr McGuigan:** Like everyone, I welcome the motion and will vote in favour of it.

Indeed, as Dr Aiken said, who could argue against it? As we move out of the global pandemic, and as COVID, over time, hopefully plays a diminishing part in our daily lives, conversely, the climate emergency and dealing with it will play an ever-increasing part.

We have had enough debates in the Chamber over the past year to know that we all agree with the world's science community when it says that, as a global community, we have just over a decade to get carbon emissions under control before catastrophic climate change impacts become unavoidable. Again, through the various debates in the past year, it is clear that it is the settled will of the Assembly and of society as a whole for the North to play its part in the climate fightback through legislation, and to do so by setting ambitious net zero targets.

Speaking earlier today in the Chamber to another motion on the Climate Change Bill, on behalf of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, I stated that we recognise the profound impact that climate change has

on our environment but also understand that the Climate Change Bill will have implications for many sectors of our economy, including farming, agri-food, energy production, infrastructure and transport.

Given that, I welcome the fact that the AERA Committee on which I sit has launched its call for evidence on the Climate Change Bill. Over the coming months, the Committee will explore all the evidence and science from interested stakeholders and members of the public, and I appeal here today for everyone to use that opportunity to have their say on the Climate Change Bill.

If net zero targets are the destination, the green new deal must be seen as the transport network used to get there. Indeed, the ambition contained in any green new deal will determine how quickly we arrive at our destination. We need a green new deal that recognises that economic, social and climate justice are intertwined, and, as other Members have said, we need joined-up government, as it will affect all sections and all Departments.

I take the opportunity to welcome last week's Department for Infrastructure announcement of an e-transport scheme on Rathlin Island in my constituency and commend that island community on its ambition to become carbon-neutral.

As is the case for all MLAs' constituents, my constituents in North Antrim want to see action on climate change as part of the Executive's future economic policies. As an MLA representing my constituents, I want to ensure that, as my colleague Dr Archibald said earlier, those future policies and our recovery from COVID must be based on principles that support workers, families and young people and that support businesses to create, maintain and grow jobs. Those policies must be delivered through a fair and just transition and a sustainable economy.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. I am listening to claims about climate justice, whatever that is, and I have to say that justice seems to creep into every discussion. What justice is there for the farming community in North Antrim, which makes an invaluable contribution to the husbandry of our constituency and whose lives and livelihoods are now being put in jeopardy? In fact, as has been the case with some previous attempts, they are being blamed for the problem. For those families and for the future of their young people, can the Member therefore explain to me how he will support farming in our constituency of North Antrim and achieve his goal of saving the world?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr McGuigan:** Thank you, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. As I have said on many occasions, and as I was saying in my speech, I represent a rural constituency that is heavily dependent on agriculture, the agri-food sector and tourism, and I do not think that any of what we are talking about today, or previously when we talked about the Climate Change Bill, will jeopardise that. I have said that the call for evidence has been opened. I encourage representatives from the agriculture and agri-food sectors in North Antrim and right across the North to have their voices heard. We will listen to them, just as we will listen to the science as we move forward. As I had stated before the Member interrupted me, key to that will be a just transition.

The Member may well be moving on to higher fields in the Executive and may well be able to play a key part in ensuring delivery, not just for his and my constituents in North Antrim but for constituents right across this island, on some of the important issues that we are talking about.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. Let us remember that the House said that RHI was a bad thing, was too costly, was a scandal, and was an awful thing that should not have happened. How will we pay for making that transition? Will we be put in the same position of having a scheme that is not fit for purpose and ends up with everybody crying foul and our having another disaster on our hands? How will we square that circle?

**Mr McGuigan:** I heard the Member praise the Tory Government earlier. It is clear from the past year that even the Tory Government, which inflicted austerity on the people of the North for 10 years, can find the money when a crisis such as COVID comes along. I think that, if we are talking about providing a future for our citizens, businesses and young people, we will find the money.

People talk about climate and green recovery as if it is always a negative. This is a positive.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a conclusion?

**Mr McGuigan:** The things that we are talking about will boost our economy and provide jobs for his and my constituents in North Antrim.

**Mr Harvey:** I will briefly add my support to a number of comments that have been made by party colleagues and some other Members across the Chamber during the debate. As a member of the AERA Committee, I know about some of what is already being achieved by the Department to drive growth within a green and sustainable framework. The launch of DAERA's green growth recovery road map from COVID-19 focuses heavily on ambitious change in every sector. The allocations of £23 million of assistance to local government aimed at further improvements to recycling services and £7.5 million to the farm business improvement scheme are two practical examples of green growth policies in action.

I have raised a note of caution previously in the House in relation to the setting of unachievable, or even damaging, targets for our businesses as we work to tackle climate change in particular. We cannot burden industry with unworkable quotas and then wonder why there is no economic growth. It is incumbent on us, as legislators, to work with our business communities to provide the tools and support needed to assist them to develop green and sustainable practices for the future. There is a need to take on board independent expert advice, including the clear findings of the Climate Change Committee in relation to net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and the impact on the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland in particular.

I fully support the need to ensure that the economic recovery is underpinned by initiatives that are sustainable and environmentally responsible and support decarbonisation. It will also be important to ensure that investment is inclusive of, and fair towards, all communities, households and industries. I agree that sustainable solutions can bring benefits to the standards of living that are enjoyed by people in Northern Ireland and help to tackle deprivation and isolation.

The Economy Minister has previously outlined her vision in relation to the development of Northern Ireland as a global leader in a future hydrogen economy. I welcome her commitments in relation to the hydrogen hub project thus far. It was encouraging to hear of the establishment this month of the Hydrogen NI group, which brings together key energy providers and business stakeholders to see that vision becoming a reality. It is evident that that initiative is already informing our economic drivers, and I look forward to seeing how it develops. Northern Ireland is, of course, well placed to use renewable electricity and produce green hydrogen. That would make use of the wind that is available when the demand for electricity is lower. Onshore wind currently provides more than 80% of Northern Ireland's renewables capacity. We need to exploit that.

Another key element of our recovery beyond COVID-19 is our tourism industry and our potential to attract foreign visitors. It is important that we ensure that the Executive give the travel industry clarity on the way ahead and that, when changes are made to the green list for travel, those are communicated clearly to the public and travel companies.

The task ahead is great, but, as we emerge from COVID-19, we are presented with a unique opportunity to effect change for the better in terms of how we live, work and do business. As our country embarks on its next century, I have every faith that we will do so and that the very best days are still to come.

#### 4.00 pm

**Mr O'Dowd:** In general, Members agree that action needs to be taken. There may be differences of opinion on what action has to be taken, the speed of that action, who pays for it and all those things. However, the one thing that, I think, we all agree on is this: climate action has to be taken. Therefore, we need a green new deal. I think that, among the public, there is huge support for or acknowledgement of the fact that climate action has to be taken. I suspect that the same debate is taking place: what action do we need to take, and who pays for it?

The action that we need to take will probably be the biggest change in production since the Industrial Revolution. That is the scale of the change that we need across the globe to change the damage that has already been done to the climate and to ensure that there is not further damage. Let us learn from the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution brought great things to many people across the globe; it also brought the damage to the environment that we live with now. It damaged, in many ways, not only the environment; workers paid a heavy price in the early and mid stages of the Industrial Revolution. Let us ensure, through the green new deal, that workers are not the ones who pay the price of the green new deal and that the tax burden is not placed on workers and families as we move to bring in the green new deal. When I talk about the tax burden, I am talking about direct taxation or indirect taxation. There is no point in giving the wealthy more tax breaks to buy greener houses, greener bigger cars and greener holidays. That is a waste of an opportunity. What we need is a fair and equitable transition to a just, new society. That has to include all of our society.

Many have rightly talked about the farming and rural community, where there are concerns about the debate



and the discussion on climate change. There are concerns about the targets that have been set. People ask, "Well, how is it just for the farming community?". Significant parts of my constituency are rural and have a farming community, and I engage with them as much as anyone else. It is clear to me that, if you want to look at a sector that is familiar with transition, change and accepting that it has to adapt to the circumstances in front of it, it is the farming community. They have had to do it down through the years to survive. There is an acknowledgement as well that, if we do not tackle climate change and the adverse weather conditions that face us, the earlier introduction of the seasons, the loss of pollinating insects and all those other things that are happening now to the farming community, farming does not have a great future. Farmers want to see change. Rightly, however, they ask questions.

The consultation that the AERA Committee has launched gives all sections of society a huge opportunity to come forward and have their voices heard to help to shape the Climate Change Bill to ensure that it delivers climate action, delivers an opportunity for a green new deal and delivers for our economy, which, as I said, will be a new economy.

How do we ensure that workers do not pay the price for it? We create well-paid, meaningful jobs that are fit for the 21st century in the circumstances of a green new deal. We retrofit our homes. We build homes that use less energy, use no energy whatever in some circumstances or certainly use renewable energy. We ensure that the innovation that exists in our society is exploited to the maximum. There are many examples from around the world of where countries and societies have started to move to renewable energy, different forms of energy, different ways of production and different ways of doing a lot of things. We can copy those, but we can also, as we have shown time and time again, innovate and lead the world.

I will end on this point: saying to rural communities, "You will have to do without your car", is not a way forward. Rural communities do not have transport options. Are there different ways to support rural communities? Of course there are. I support the green new deal. There is a debate on how we move forward, but we have to move forward.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the proposer of the motion and his colleagues for bringing it to the Assembly.

The COVID pandemic has resulted in an economic shutdown that has lasted longer than any of us would have wished, and with it has come human loss in many homes. It occurred at a time when the Assembly and its Executive, along with Governments across the world, should have been focusing their attention on the demands of tackling the climate crisis. As we seek to recover from that shutdown, we have an opportunity to re-evaluate our approach, to reset the economy and to build a future society that delivers on social and economic justice and decarbonises our economy to meet a net zero target for greenhouse gas emissions.

As well as recovery from the pandemic and the threats from the climate crisis, we face the additional problem of the impact of Brexit on our economy. As the DUP has realised, the free trade agreements that their former friends in the Tory Government are pursuing post Brexit

will damage the Northern Ireland economy. Mr Irwin referred to his colleague's climate Bill, but we have yet to see the details of it in order to determine whether we can support it. I welcome that discourse happening and the Bill coming through the Committee.

Those who oppose the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol should realise that, in the free trade area that is being introduced by the Tories in a race to the bottom, it is protecting the Northern Ireland market from food products imported from countries with less responsible environmental and food safety standards. It is the 50% of our agri-food that we export to Britain that will face competition from the exports of those countries as a result of the Tory Government's free trade deal approach. Each one of those deals brings with it a risk of compounding the damage done to our economy and to the climate as a consequence. We should use tariffs proactively, like the EU does, to prevent companies exploiting lower environmental standards, such as, for example, deforestation, and low labour costs — the way that they treat their labour forces — to produce cheaper foods. As well as that, there is the damage to the environment from the methods of transporting those goods long distances to GB or Northern Ireland. That undercuts the more responsible states that have more responsible approaches to the climate crisis. In effect, it is, in many ways, as I said, a race to the bottom.

The SDLP believes that there is support for an economic recovery plan that aligns with wider social, environmental and climate goals. The Executive parties have already committed to such a plan. It is in the 'New Decade, New Approach' commitment that:

*"The Economic Strategy will support clean and inclusive growth and create jobs as part of a Green New Deal."*

However, when the Economy Minister announced her economic vision for a decade of innovation on 11 May in a press release — not in the Assembly — that commitment had been watered down to "supporting a greener economy".

It is often the case with headline-grabbing lines that the further detail of supposedly green policies are worth paying attention to. Mr Irwin correctly referred to the infrastructure that is required for new electric vehicles as we strive to meet the priorities and commitments that we have made to end the use of diesel and petrol vehicles by, I think, 2035. However, further aspects of that have to be dealt with. I should add that Mr Irwin's party colleague at DAERA has been in dialogue with my party colleague at the Department for Infrastructure to work on that. We also need to involve his party colleague from the Department for the Economy.

Not everyone can afford a vehicle at £30,000, £40,000 or £50,000 straight off. There are further issues of poverty and accessibility in our rural areas, where people will simply not be able to afford those vehicles. Mobility in rural areas will be affected unless there is a policy of subsidisation that will, in some way, make those vehicles more accessible.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGlone:** Yes.

**Mr Storey:** The difficulty I have when I come to the House is that we want to do everything. Here we go; here is another party that castigated my colleagues and the scandal of RHI, but now we are talking about another subsidy. When are we going to have an honest debate about subsidies and the amount of money that we pump across government? Yet, when it comes to reducing carbon emissions, we are closing down one of the very schemes that contributed to that.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute. Before I call the Member to take his minute, I remind all others that interventions should be brief. There is an additional space on the list for a DUP Member, so if Mr Storey wants to make a speech, he is more than welcome to do so. I do not know whether the House wills that, but he is more than welcome to. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McGlone:** As ever, I welcome Mr Storey's interventions here and outside, so I thank him for that.

One could argue that, in theory, RHI was a good scheme, but its outworkings, the inability to detect where it was going wrong and the oversight of it led to the chaos that it turned out to be. Yes, we need subsidies. We cannot have people in rural areas like the ones that you and I live in not having access to transport. As the changes emerge and the introduction of electric vehicles improves the process of evolution towards reducing the emissions that affect the climate, we will need support for people. People simply cannot be put in the position where only the rich are mobile. We have had enough of that.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am afraid that the Member's time is up.

**Mr Dickson:** We are, indeed, at what might be described as a pivot point in our history. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how our economy is not working as it should. Too many people are in insecure and poorly paid jobs, with few opportunities to retrain. The economy inequality gap is growing. The pandemic has also shown us that things can be done fundamentally differently and that many of the old orthodoxies, such as the clear failure that is austerity, can and should be cast aside.

We need to change how we live and work in order to avoid another major crisis. However, another major crisis is facing us, and that is the climate emergency. We have to transition to a zero-carbon economy not only to save our planet but to secure and improve quality of life for us and, even more importantly, future generations. My Alliance Party colleague John Blair already set out that a green new deal is essential in order to move towards a better future for everyone in a just and inclusive manner. There are some parties in the Chamber that talk the talk, but they also need to walk the walk in a coherent and united manner.

Last month, we in the Alliance Party published our green new deal document to outline how we, as a society, can do just that for our economy and our environment. Building a green economy offers Northern Ireland major opportunities to lead the world and to attract major investment and tens of thousands of sustainable jobs into Northern Ireland. We have the resources to build that with our young, educated workforce, our abundant potential for clean energy and our strong telecommunications network. However, we need the right regulatory framework in place in order to prioritise

investment in research and development and to market Northern Ireland chiefly through organisations like Invest NI. We should be striving to make Northern Ireland a green economy hub for the whole of Europe.

We need to take action to ensure that everyone benefits from the potential of the green economy and that we move away from carbon-intensive industries. It must not be like the deindustrialisation of the '70s and '80s, which crippled the community that I come from in Carrickfergus when we lost Courtaulds, immediately followed by ICI. We must break the pernicious cycle of underachievement in Northern Ireland with meaningful and comprehensive interventions in education and skills.

Lifelong learning and easy access to education must be a central plank in how we move forward. That includes tackling problems of affordability, flexible working and the lack of affordable childcare. The Alliance Party's green new deal would deliver a much-needed skills strategy to tackle the skills gap in Northern Ireland and ensure that everyone has a skill to take advantage of future opportunities. We want specific green apprenticeships. We urgently need these new skills.

#### 4.15 pm

A major task before us is to decarbonise our entire energy landscape. Homes and buildings across Northern Ireland will need to be retrofitted with high-quality insulation and new high-efficiency heating systems that deliver affordable warmth and eliminate the social ill of fuel poverty for ever, which is a key priority in the Alliance Party's green new deal. To ensure a stable and secure energy supply, new generation and transmission capacity will need to be developed, and major technical challenges will need to be overcome.

To thrive, people need secure and fair employment. The last year has shown us how the system of employment rights is not meeting the needs of today's society. Far too many people are being left without basic income security, many of them going to work when ill because they simply cannot afford to stay at home on the unacceptably low statutory sick pay provision. Discrimination in employment also continues to be a serious issue. Homeworking has taken off in a way that no one in January 2020 could have envisaged, yet, we see the pernicious use of fire and rehire tactics to worsen the terms and conditions and pay of employees.

I speak for all when I express my thanks to those working in the care sector for their compassion and tireless work during the pandemic. I did not stand up and clap for a 1% pay rise for our NHS workers. They deserve what they deserve. The Alliance Party's green deal will tackle these issues head-on by regulating the gig economy and instituting an employment rights framework for the 2020s, not the 1990s. This will include stronger reporting requirements for gender and ethnicity, and it will ensure that our labour market is inclusive and fair. Government must act now to invest in our people —.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a conclusion, please.

**Mr Dickson:** Let us work together to institute a green new deal for Northern Ireland. Let us seize the opportunity of being at the cutting edge of a green new deal.

**Ms Bailey:** I support the motion, obviously, and I thank the Member for tabling it. However, I do so mindful of the Green Party's track record of calling for a green new deal for over a decade. During the debate, I listened to some of the ideas about what can be done to roll it out in Northern Ireland. I point out that the green new deal is not a new concept but long-established work by the Green New Deal Group following the financial crisis of 2007. The membership of that group was drawn to reflect a wide range of expertise in economics and politics, as well as in the climate, nature and inequality crises. The views and recommendations of the group are set out in a series of reports that started as far back as 2008. Maybe it is no longer a green new deal but the only deal left in town. One of the founding members of the group, Caroline Lucas MP, is, along with Clive Lewis MP, bringing forward the Green New Deal Bill at Westminster. That will be game-changing legislation, and similar is needed in Northern Ireland.

I agree with the Green New Deal Group when it states:

*"The global economy faces multiple, linked crises. It is a combination of accelerating climate breakdown driven by fossil fuel use, corrosive inequality and debt-fuelled over-consumption by a global minority pushing us beyond planetary ecological boundaries. These overlapping factors threaten to develop into a perfect storm making social collapse highly likely. To help prevent this from happening, and to lay the foundations of the economic systems of the future, we need a Green New Deal. There is still time. Act now and a positive course of action based on the framework set out in the Green New Deal can pull the world back from economic and environmental meltdown."*

The green new deal is, in the loosest terms, a massive programme of investment in new technologies, community and business. The hard work has been done. All that is really needed is the political will to implement it.

Our response to the COVID-19 pandemic has proven how far and how fast we can create change and do things differently. Nothing short of similar efforts will be required to implement a green new deal and create a society that is sustainable and leaves no one behind. Re-engineering the economy will take much more than a few new policies and some slight shifts in spending priorities. The Green Party has known for a long time that we can afford the necessary action, and, more often than not, we have been derided and ridiculed for championing them. I remember that, during the 2011 Assembly election campaign, many parties supported and endorsed a green new deal, yet we have seen no implementation and no delivery from Ministers since they secured their seat.

While it is encouraging that there is consensus across the House on the motion, I want to be clear: political inaction has brought us to the brink of irreparable damage being done. Political inaction alone must take responsibility for the seismic, radical shift and the rapid changes that must now be urgently rolled out if our children are to survive and thrive. A green new deal is the only plausible way forward. It will take much more than words and consensus; it will take action and implementation. The Green Party will be watching how that is done and what is prioritised within it, because failure is no longer an option.

**Mr Carroll:** I support the call today for a green new deal and for economic and social justice as we rapidly

decarbonise our economy. I thank the Members who tabled the motion.

I believe that, to achieve a sustainable and eco-friendly society, we need a just transition away from the causes of the climate crisis, and that must extend far beyond our borders. Those in countries that are at the greatest risk from the climate crisis are also at the greatest risk of being left behind. The COVID pandemic is a perfect example of how the capitalist system blocks those at the bottom of society from accessing the support necessary to survive and live. That is as true of vaccine patents and the profit-driven production of medical aid as it is of adapting to and mitigating the effects of the climate crisis.

The very wealthy who can afford to adapt to newer climates will do so without so much as an afterthought for those who cannot. They will continue to create profit, no matter the cost to our planet. Indeed, it is the wealthiest multinational corporations and their profit motive that are responsible for the greatest emissions and the greatest damage to our planet and the pillaging of our natural resources. The world's richest 1% have caused double the amount of CO2 emissions than the poorest 50% from 1990 until 2015. That is not according to me; it is according to Oxfam. They have not only squandered our global carbon budget and brought us to the brink of climate catastrophe but made worse the lives of working-class people and the very poor across the world. Bottom wages, poor working conditions, pollution of the air, water reserves and the earth — just to name a few — destruction of habitats and even homes — all that has been driven by the insatiable need for more profits to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.

That context should underscore everything that we do when we plan for a more sustainable future. Tinkering around the edges of the system will not work. Taking half measures that green our appearance but do not drastically reduce our emissions will not cut it. We need to see tangible, transformative change in society that challenges the root cause of the crisis: capitalism. That means being a global leader in banning fossil fuel exploration. It means standing up to the multinationals that want access to local reserves by saying — pardon the pun — "Not on our turf". It means acknowledging that we have a problem with production and agriculture and doing what needs to be done to ensure that sustainability does not leave ordinary farmers behind but instead gives them the skills and assistance needed to produce sustainably, based on the needs of our communities rather than on the profit that it provides.

There is a disappointing reluctance from the Executive to take action in that arena and to talk about how we can incentivise ordinary farmers and improve their lot while reducing our methane outputs. That reluctance spreads to their failure to recognise the damage done by underfunding public transport. There is also a reluctance to break with the fossil fuel industry or stand up to those who want to have their way with our local environment. There can be no place for such reluctance in the fight for climate justice, and it is a fight for justice.

I will speak briefly about workers' rights. Any move to a so-called green economy must be accompanied by the implementation of a proper living wage, the recognition of trade unions across new sectors, and the banning of precarious working conditions and zero-hours contracts.

Quickly, I want to pay tribute to the Hovis food production workers, who have fought an incredible fight and had an improved pay offer from management today. I also want to mention the workers in the meat production plants, who have had to face unsafe working conditions and exposure to COVID-19 clusters. Those are the same workers who are underpaid and underappreciated, and the issues are not unconnected.

We have an opportunity here not just to green our economy a bit but to make a monumental shift that would better in one fell swoop the lives of so many workers and those who are most vulnerable to the climate crisis. That will require a challenge to the normal order here and globally. I do not know whether Mr Muir and the other Members who tabled the motion would go as far as to agree with what I am suggesting here, but things such as workers' control, proper democracy in planning and production, and a break with the status quo are what is required.

I urge those in the Chamber and those watching to check out articles and publications by eco-socialists, whose ideas could rescue our future and the future of generations to come. If that is not important to some people in the House, look at the young demonstrators on our streets and recognise why it is important for them and many, many others.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Andrew Muir to wind on the debate on the motion.

**Mr Muir:** Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Can I clarify how long I have?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** You have 10 minutes.

**Mr Muir:** Thank you very much. In winding on the debate, I will make a few remarks and then summarise some of the contributions that were made. From the Alliance Party's perspective and from my perspective, emerging from the pandemic, we have an opportunity to tackle the climate emergency whilst also creating new jobs and building a just and inclusive society. In summing up some of the contributions that have been made today, I will later touch on the need for a just transition, a matter that a number of Members raised.

As many Members said, the situation demands a bold vision and strong leadership. The Alliance Party feels that we need to grasp that chance for change and look at the examples throughout history of societies emerging from times of crisis with bold initiatives to tackle the major issues of the day, such as the original New Deal after the Great Depression or the establishment of the NHS after World War II. This time last year, none of us had fully grasped the enormity of the change that would arise as a result of COVID-19. Coming out of it now, hopefully, we will be able to turn our back on the pandemic eventually. It is about understanding the nature of the change and the impact that it has had on society, and there is a need for the response from government to be bold and show great leadership.

The Executive cannot tackle the climate emergency alone, but they have it within their power to make a start in the right direction here in Northern Ireland. My portfolio is infrastructure, and we need to supercharge the electric vehicle charging market, as was touched on today during Question Time. We need to rebalance our priorities

towards active travel and support our public transport network in adapting and thriving in a post-pandemic environment.

As I have been on the record as saying today and previously, the electric vehicle charging network that we have at the moment is a shambles. We need one Minister to drive forward and champion change. It is a perfect example of silo departmental working and the buck being passed from one Department to another. Someone needs to grasp the issue and drive it forward. One of the issues is that the current network of chargers is falling apart. Fixing that would be welcomed, but, essentially, that is bringing us back to the future. We need to take on board the feedback that has been given from the Electric Vehicle Association Northern Ireland, the electric vehicles owners' group, which has a six-point plan for tackling the matter. There are clear issues on which the group has outlined the problems but also the solutions. If there is anything that this place needs to do in the last year of its existence in this current mandate, it is to tackle the electric vehicle charging network.

Beyond that, I welcome the Minister's passion for and commitment to active travel, but that needs to be matched with funding. The commitment to and the leadership shown on electric vehicles, active travel and the use of public transport is welcome, but we need to put our money where our mouth is, and we need to support them.

The current investment in active travel is woeful.

#### 4.30 pm

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Member for giving way. Is he also concerned about the discrepancy in the likes of cycling infrastructure? Places in my West Belfast constituency and North Belfast have much less cycling infrastructure than, say, South or East Belfast. We need to do a lot more to put in infrastructure in those areas.

**Mr Muir:** I entirely agree with Mr Carroll. I got injured from running about three months ago so I have not been out doing much running. I have been using the bicycle much more often. The cycling network is diabolical. It is scary for people to go out unless it is on a cycle path — a properly segregated cycle path, not a shared footway. Road surfaces are not maintained correctly, and only in certain parts of Northern Ireland are we lucky enough to have a greenway network. If we are to encourage more people to take up active travel, we must put in place safe routes. So many parts of Northern Ireland, particularly rural areas, are just forgotten about in that respect. It is not good enough to say, "It is for councils to bring forward initiatives, and we will consider funding them". Councils are not given any funding or resource to run feasibility studies and take this forward. That is a key issue.

As we come out of COVID-19, we need to have good service options in public transport. There is no point in encouraging people to use public transport when the level of bus and rail services could eventually be cut if we do not sustain funding for them. We must also encourage young people to use public transport by extending concessionary fares to the age of 22. People with entitlement to half fare currently have to pay half the adult single fare: that is not fair or right. Free fares should be extended to people with disability. We have all talked about Glider phase 2 and the need to deliver on that. I agree with that, but the approval

process for bus lanes is far too cumbersome and long-winded. We need to find ways to streamline that process and to realise the commitments that have been made to high-speed rail.

Before another Member intervenes, this key question has to be faced: how do we fund this? We can bring motions to the Chamber and call for initiatives, but we need to find ways to fund those. We need to face up to the cost of division in Northern Ireland. The figures have been cited year after year, but we are not prepared to take the difficult decisions. We need to be able to utilise our borrowing powers to a greater extent and reform our public services. COVID-19 has shown us how we can change things. We need to continue in that vein with respect to our public services. We also need multi-year budgets — we will talk about that in tomorrow's Budget debate — to allow for long-term planning. The fiscal council will play a key role in the scrutiny of our finances.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. He talks about reform of public services. I first came to the House in 2003, and we have always talked about the 60:40 split and how we should turn that around. Does the Member accept that, if we do that, people will lose their jobs? The voluntary exit scheme cost us millions and we have not changed the 60:40 split, so it really was not a success.

**Mr Muir:** If we are to reform, we need to bring people with us. We need to look at innovative ways to deliver services, such as online. In the past year, an awful lot of services that, we were told, could never be delivered online have been. We need to continue in that vein.

We also need to take into account the level of stimulus that has been given by the UK Government. Whilst that is welcome, compared with the stimuli that have been given in other parts of the world, particularly the United States of America, our level of stimulus does not cut the mustard. We need to invest in a green new deal, particularly in relation to infrastructure. The Chancellor's announcement earlier this year was disappointing in respect of the lack of investment in infrastructure.

As I said in my opening remarks, a number of the comments during the debate were about the need for a just transition. Tackling climate change and the climate emergency that we declared at the beginning of last year has to be done with people. We have to do it together and bring people with us in partnership. It cannot be done to people and communities. It has to be a just transition that is about creating new jobs and supporting communities and the livelihoods that they need to sustain them.

In opening the debate, John Blair rightly touched on the threats of climate change. Gary Middleton talked about the need for a just transition and about hydrogen. It is one of the fuels of the future, and we need to adapt to that. The sources from which to obtain hydrogen, particularly green hydrogen, are limited. We need to invest in that in Northern Ireland and be ahead of the game.

Mark Durkan joined us on the screens virtually from Derry/Londonderry and talked about how going green would mean economic success. The economics and finances of a green new deal make sense. We need to make that clear.

Philip McGuigan talked about the need for joined-up government. We have a Programme for Government,

whether in draft or final form, but it needs to be much better in tackling siloed departmental working, such as with the e-car network.

John O'Dowd spoke about the need for change and new jobs. Change is difficult, but we should not run away from it. It brings opportunities as well as challenges.

Patsy McGlone talked about the impact that Brexit is having on our ability to tackle the issues. He rightly spoke on those matters.

Towards the end of the debate, Clare Bailey talked about the need for a green new deal and said that it had been long awaited: I agree. We need to invest in our future.

Gerry Carroll talked about the need for radical action. He also said that workers' rights needed to be protected and enhanced. That point has been acutely transparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we need to be conscious of it.

The Climate Change Bill that was brought forward as a multi-party Bill was debated in the Chamber a few weeks ago. If we back the motion, it is important that we also back the Climate Change Bill. I urge all Members to back the Bill, including all Members from every party that says that it supports it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly recognises that recovery from the pandemic and tackling the climate crisis go hand in hand, requiring an investment-led, green recovery that delivers on social and economic justice and rapidly decarbonises our economy; and calls on the Executive to deliver a green new deal that will create an equitable, sustainable economy filled with well-paid, secure, low-carbon jobs in care, education and health as well as in industry and infrastructure, and to ensure well-being and inclusion are at the centre of government decision-making.*

*Adjourned at 4.36 pm.*



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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 25 May 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Ministerial Statement

### North/South Ministerial Council: Transport

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister for Infrastructure that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in light of 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 as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during the statement or the question period immediately after.

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the transport sector held via videoconference on Wednesday 5 May 2021. The meeting was chaired by Eamon Ryan, Minister for Transport in the South, and was attended by First Minister Arlene Foster and me. A number of issues were discussed at the meeting, including the latest EU funding position; New Decade, New Approach commitments; sustainable travel and transport; and our future work programme for the transport sector.

Ministers welcomed the continued cooperation between my Department and the Department of Transport on EU funding-related matters and the potential for significant funding opportunities for North/South cooperation in the transport sector. The Council noted the various commitments outlined in 'New Decade, New Approach', particularly in the area of infrastructural investment. On the A5 western transport corridor, Ministers noted that both Governments remain committed to the A5 scheme. The Council noted that I, as Minister for Infrastructure, have fully considered all the recommendations made in the interim report from the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) in September 2020 and have now announced the next steps for the scheme. They include the preparation of a further addendum to the environmental statement for consultation in early autumn, leading to the reopening of the public inquiry early next year.

On high-speed rail connectivity, Ministers noted that both Departments have further developed draft terms of reference for a strategic review of the rail network on

the island of Ireland that will take account of the need for balanced regional development, particularly in relation to connectivity with the north-west. The Council noted that the all-island strategic rail review was jointly launched by Minister Ryan and me on 7 April 2021 and that that work and the study will be overseen by a high-level steering group comprising representatives from both Departments as well as transport authorities from North and South.

The Council noted the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' on the Narrow Water bridge and agreed that Departments will consider next steps to progress the scheme.

Ministers noted that the review to explore potential government support for renewed air services between Belfast and Cork and Derry and Dublin is being led by the Department of Transport, working with the Department for the Economy and the Department for Transport in London.

The Council also noted the ongoing work on cross-border greenways.

The Council noted updates provided by the Department of Transport on a sustainable mobility policy review and by the Department for Infrastructure on transport decarbonisation policy development, including increasing sustainable and active travel. Ministers noted that officials from both jurisdictions will continue to liaise on policy development on sustainable transport and travel. The Council agreed that a further update, including on opportunities for future collaboration, will be provided at the next meeting.

Ministers also noted the outcome of the review carried out by both Departments on the current NSMC transport sector work programme and agreed the revised transport work programme.

The Council considered a number of other issues, including the Safefood business plan and budget for 2021. Ministers approved the Safefood business plan for 2021 and the recommended budget provision for 2021.

In respect of the North/South language bodies, the Council also approved the 2020-22 corporate plans for Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency and the 2021 business plans for both agencies. The Council recommended the budget provisions for Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency for 2021 and noted the indicative budgets for both organisations for 2020-22, which will be subject to budgetary considerations by both Administrations. The Council appointed Regina Uí Chollatáin as chair of Foras na Gaeilge and Freda Nic Giolla Chatháin to its board. The Council also appointed

Freddie Kettle as vice chair of the Ulster-Scots Agency and Allen McAdam, Lavinia Tilson and Karyn Devenney to its board.

In closing, I welcome these important formal NSMC meetings and will continue to work with my counterpart, Minister Ryan, as we continue to collaborate on many aspects of transport across the island in order to improve connectivity for all our citizens.

**Mr Boylan:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas ón Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. I am delighted that greenways were mentioned, but I am a wee bit disappointed that the Middletown to Smithborough greenway will not meet its 2021 target. In light of that, will the Minister undertake to work with the NSMC and others who are involved in the project in order to deliver it as soon as possible? She knows how important the project is for that area.

**Ms Mallon:** The Ulster canal greenway is one of the primary greenway routes in 'Exercise, Explore, Enjoy: A Strategic Plan for Greenways', which was published by my Department in 2016. As the Member will know, phase 2 of the Smithborough to Middletown project is under way. The greenway stops just short of Middletown village, at Annagola bridge, where a footway link to the village is to be constructed by my Department. Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council has put forward a proposal to extend the greenway northwards, which would assist delivery of the next phase of greenway development to Caledon. I am keen that my officials work to support those efforts and all efforts across all council areas to expand our greenway connectivity across the North and across the island.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Minister for her commitment to North/South relationships and to this work, which is important for the economy and the environment.

You mentioned climate change targets, Minister. What further work do you envisage that there can be collaboration on to tackle the climate change crisis?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for her question. We are working on projects that are all about tackling the climate emergency. Minister Eamon Ryan is passionate about the subject, and we are both ambitious about what we, as Ministers, can do. The all-island strategic rail review is an example of how we can work collaboratively to encourage people to get out of their private cars and use public transport. We have reviewed our work programme and added a new agenda item on sustainable travel and transport that will look at areas of collaboration and at encouraging the modal shifts that are required. A lot of work has been done, but it is important to review and update the work programme to reflect the changed environment of the climate emergency and the importance given to that so that we see much more positive and collaborative work that translates directly into climate action across the island.

**Mr Stewart:** The Minister's statement mentioned the New Decade, New Approach commitments on infrastructure investment, but several NDNA schemes are unfunded. Will the Minister acknowledge that, if she prioritises unfunded NDNA projects over road safety improvements, maintenance and resurfacing, it could come at the cost of increasing the number of potholes and compromising the safety of citizens?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. We went through that in quite a lot of detail during yesterday's Question Time. The reality is that there is a significant shortfall in investment and in the funding that has been allocated to my Department. My Department will carry out its statutory obligations. Once we have our budget, we have to take out the Executive flagships and our statutory requirements, which we are contractually obliged to do. It is true that that does not leave much flexibility to do anything else, but it is important that we recognise that 'New Decade, New Approach' is the agreement on which the institutions were restored. It is the basis on which I entered the Executive on behalf of the SDLP. There is therefore a responsibility on all Ministers to deliver on the commitments set out in 'New Decade, New Approach'. That is why I have been trying to work closely with the British Government to maximise funding and to ensure that they honour their commitments to turbocharging infrastructure, which they promised to the people of Northern Ireland in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I am also working with the Irish Government on the Taoiseach's Shared Island Fund so that we maximise opportunities to draw down funding and can deliver on the commitments that we have made to the people of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I am glad that the meeting finally went ahead.

The Minister's statement provides an update on sustainable travel and transport. As the Minister is aware, the Minister and the Government in the Republic of Ireland have committed to rebalancing their budgets towards public transport and active and sustainable travel; for example, 20% of the budget in the Republic of Ireland will go towards active travel: 10% to cycling and 10% to walking. Does the Minister intend to take a similar lead in Northern Ireland? I was concerned yesterday when the Minister outlined that she intends to deliver a similar level of £20 million investment in a blue-green fund in this financial year, yet she has a 29% increase in her capital budget, so that is a comparative cut for active travel. Will the Minister reverse that decision and rebalance the budget towards sustainable travel?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. In respect of sustainable travel and transport, we will continue to work on decarbonising our public transport network. That is important for improving air quality and reducing congestion. We will also work together to see how we can encourage more people to walk, cycle and wheel and to use those as their primary modes of travel in our towns and city centres.

As a member of the Infrastructure Committee, the Member will know that the spending that is required for the Executive flagship commitments is ratcheting up. As I said to Mr Stewart, when you take out the statutory obligations and Executive commitments, there is not much flexibility in the budget to do everything that we would like to do. I gave a commitment that I will continue with the blue-green fund.

That is the first time that we have had an infrastructural blue-green fund, which is to act as a catalyst for change on climate action.

#### 10.45 am

The Member will also know that we have invested £96 million in the purchase of zero-emission and low-emission



buses to decarbonise our public transport fleet, which is an important part of climate action. He will also be aware that we invested £66 million in 21 new train carriages. We are engaging in a lot of different work, including work on the e-charging infrastructure, and all of this is about giving people much more attractive choices for sustainable travel and encouraging them to use our public transport system. We will continue to do that and maximise our ambition and delivery within the limited financial envelope that has been given to us.

**Ms Kimmins:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I, too, am glad to hear cross-border greenways being mentioned. Can the Minister advise whether the Carlingford lough greenway was discussed at the meeting, particularly the plans to link the greenway from Victoria lock in Newry to the border? That would significantly enhance what is already a fantastic greenway and would certainly improve safety for walkers and cyclists, who currently have to join the road again at Victoria lock to meet the greenway on down the road.

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for her question. Our greenways are a pragmatic example of how we can improve people's lives by collaborating and maximising the opportunities for greenways. The Member will know that three greenways — the Ulster canal greenway, the north-west greenway and the Carlingford lough greenway — have been subject to INTERREG funding. Difficulties are emerging with timescales and funding pressures, but my officials are working closely with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) because we realise the importance of the delivery of the Carlingford lough greenway and all the greenways that have been mentioned. We will continue to work with the SEUPB to ensure that we get the required additional funding to see those projects realised.

**Ms Anderson:** Minister, you mentioned air connectivity and sustainable travel in the statement, and TDs Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, Darren O'Rourke and I recently met the City of Derry Airport board. As you know, Derry's airport services the entire north-west and further afield, and 40% of the passengers who use it come from Donegal, yet the operational cost of the airport is left to the ratepayers of Derry, with the Irish Government making no contribution at all. Was the operational cost and financial sustainability of City of Derry Airport discussed? Was the Derry/Dublin public service obligation discussed at the meeting?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for her question. She will know that I, as Minister for Infrastructure, have limited statutory powers in relation to our three main airports. That is set down in the Airports (Northern Ireland) Order 1994. My Department and I were able to provide support to airports, including to City of Derry Airport, during the pandemic. For expediency and logistical reasons, my Department facilitated the distribution of a £5.7 million support package of emergency funding, on behalf of the Executive, to Belfast City Airport and City of Derry Airport in spring 2020. The cost of that was shared between the Executive and the Department for Transport. Further to that, and following Executive support, my Department provided £1.23 million in additional support to City of Derry Airport, and that short-term support grant has helped that airport to remain operational during the pandemic.

The issue of air connectivity falls to the Department for the Economy. While we raised the issue in general,

discussions are ongoing between the Department of Transport in the South, the Department for the Economy here and the Department for Transport in London on the wider air connectivity piece, so the Member may want to raise that issue directly with the Minister for the Economy. However, I assure the Member that I am very conscious of the continued impact on our airports, and, either this week or next week, I will meet representatives from City of Derry Airport with the Minister of Finance. I hope that the Minister for the Economy might join us in that meeting, given that the responsibilities fall across our three Departments.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Minister for her statement. It is clearly evident that she has worked feverishly to advance North/South and South/North opportunities. However, she has been obstructed by the DUP Ministers from taking forward important North/South Ministerial Council meetings. Can she advise on the impact of potential delays on crucial meetings and crucial all-island projects?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. The North/South Ministerial Council meetings provide a very important platform for us all across the island, and for my Department in particular, to work pragmatically on issues that will deliver multiple benefits for our citizens. The climate crisis, for example, knows no borders. It affects all of us, and the solution therefore has to be that we all work together.

It has been hugely frustrating that a number of NSMC meetings that I had been due to attend, as either a lead or an accompanying Minister, have been deliberately obstructed. I have raised the matter with ministerial colleagues. The nature of our place means that our engagement can often be very difficult and uncomfortable. We still need to engage, however. Moreover, we have to engage North/South and east-west, because the people of this island, when they voted for the Good Friday Agreement, mandated us to do so. Thirdly, engagement is not only the right thing to do but our legal obligation under the ministerial code. As we enter a new week with a new dynamic, I therefore hope that people will reflect carefully on how we can heal division in our society, how we can and should work together in partnership across these islands and how we must fulfil our legal obligations as Ministers around the Executive table.

**Mrs Barton:** I thank the Minister for her statement. In it, she said that Ministers noted that both Governments remain committed to the A5 scheme. The scheme will result in improved access to Donegal. Was there any discussion about whether the Republic of Ireland will reinstate the full £400 million roads grant that it offered towards the A5 and subsequently withdrew?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for her question. We raised the A5 project and its important role in tackling regional imbalance, connecting communities and, of course, improving road safety. There are so many communities, particularly in rural parts west of the Bann, that can benefit from investment in the A5 project. I very much welcomed the Irish Government's reaffirmation in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) of their £75 million commitment to the A5, and I have had useful discussions with the Irish Minister for Transport, Minister Ryan, and the Taoiseach about delivering on our shared commitments. The Taoiseach announced the Shared Island Fund, which is €500 million. He is keen to use that to deliver NDNA

North/South infrastructure projects, of which the A5 is one. I will continue to have very constructive engagement with my counterparts to ensure that we maximise the opportunity to drive forward that important commitment and all the other NDNA commitments.

**Mr McGuigan:** I note that sustainable travel was discussed. Having a modern and reliable charge-point network is key to sustainable travel. I welcome the fact that the Department supported the INTERREG-funded FASTER project, which will install 73 charge points in Ireland and Scotland. Was the project discussed? Does the Minister have an idea of the number of charge points, of that 73, that will come to this island?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. We did not get into the specifics of e-charging infrastructure. I want us to explore the issue further, now that we have added the new agenda item on sustainable and active travel, because we need the continued interoperability in our e-charging network across the island. We did, however, refer to the INTERREG funding as another example of collaborative working across the island and with Europe.

As the Member says, 73 rapid charging points are anticipated. Some will be in Scotland, but some will be in Northern Ireland, particularly in the border region. My Department is not the lead on that, but we are working closely with the FASTER project in SEUPB to see exactly where the charging points will be located and the final number that will come to the North. I will keep the Member updated, because I know that he has a keen interest in the matter.

**Ms Sheerin:** The Minister did not give a clear answer to Mrs Barton, who asked whether the Dublin Government will still part-fund the A5 scheme and noted how important that scheme is for the entire region west of the Bann. That region has lacked investment for decades. We can see how much frustration this final obstruction has caused residents in the north-west. Do you have a time frame of when we can expect it to be delivered?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for her question. The Member will know that the A5 project has been a very long time coming. It has been under the stewardship of a number of my predecessors. The first public inquiry was under Minister Murphy, the second was under Minister Hazzard, and the third happened when the institutions had been brought down. We now have an interim report, which means that we have to move to a reconvened public inquiry. I understand the local frustrations about it.

My officials are working at pace to produce the required environmental addendum. We will go out to a mandatory six-week consultation period on that so that we can move it back to the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) at the earliest opportunity. Of course, I have no control over the date that the PAC will determine for that hearing, but we will do everything that we can to expedite that. Once we get to that point, it will be for the Minister to decide on the next steps. I imagine that the construction of the project will be largely determined by the funding that is provided. My hope is that, where possible, it could move in parallel with different projects that are on my desk, but the progress of all those projects is largely dependent on the funding available once all the statutory processes are completed.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It appears that the DUP are not only boycotting North/South Ministerial Council meetings but boycotting holding to account Ministers who attend North/South Ministerial Council meetings. We have five DUP MLAs in the Chamber today, including the Chair of the scrutiny Committee. I am not aware of one of them asking you a question. Perhaps they would have been safer staying at home.

Minister, on your statement and North/South high-speed rail connectivity, as I have said to you before, it will be a lost opportunity if we have trains speeding from Belfast to Dublin or from Derry to Cork and the towns in between do not achieve any economic potential from that. Will the Minister ensure that high-speed rail connectivity is matched with local rail connectivity and bus connections in towns such as Lurgan, Portadown and Craigavon?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. On his initial remarks, we have a responsibility and a legal obligation to these institutions, whether that is in the Executive or in North/South and east-west bodies. We also have a duty to ensure that we have democratic accountability and scrutiny. Therefore, it is vital that I, as Minister, am held to account, that I am scrutinised and that all Members have the opportunity to ask me questions. I am disappointed at what appears to be a lack of engagement this morning, given the importance of the issues that we are discussing. These issues are not even politically controversial. They are practical issues that would really make a difference to people's lives and to the constituents of all Members across the House.

On the rail issue in his constituency that the Member highlighted, he will be aware that preparation is being undertaken by my officials on the regional strategic transport plan, which will go out to consultation later this year. That plan is about investment in our road, rail and bus network in the North. I encourage the Member to respond to that consultation to ensure that the importance of rail connectivity to the Lurgan area is made very clear.

We are coming at the all-island strategic rail review with no preordained outcome. The terms of reference are such that we will examine existing rail links on the island to see if those can be improved. We will look at where we can provide new links and where those would be beneficial. We will also look at the role that freight can play in the decarbonisation of transportation of goods on the island. We will examine rail connectivity to our international gateways, be those the ports or airports. That examination will be data-led. I am very excited by the all-island strategic rail review. It is the first time that we have looked at our transport network on the island since partition, which is really important. By working together and making data-led investment decisions, we will really improve people's lives across the island.

#### 11.00 am

When we look at Europe, we see that they are making huge advances in rail. They recognise the importance of rail; what it can do for the economy, what it does for the environment, and what it does for the regeneration of local communities. Therefore, I am excited by that piece of work.

**Mr Beggs:** In her statement, the Minister mentioned sustainable transport and transport decarbonisation policy

development. The construction of dual carriageways has a hugely adverse impact on the local environment. Normally, they are built only when they will be used by at least 18,000 vehicles a day. Does the Minister accept that there is inconsistency in what she says, given that she plans for decarbonisation yet plans to build a dual carriageway on the A5 at Aughnacloy, which is used by fewer than 8,000 vehicles a day and is totally unjustifiable, and that, in fact, she is contributing to unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions by continuing to demand that dual carriageway when it is not justifiable for road development?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. He has passionately expressed his view about the A5 to me previously, primarily during the Adjournment debate on the matter. The original scheme that was put forward through the North/South Ministerial Council in 2007 was for a dual carriageway from New Buildings to Aughnacloy. As the Member will know, the PAC has taken a different view and has said that there is an obligation on the Department, in its role as the statutory decision maker, to consider reasonable alternatives to the proposed scheme and, therefore, to examine matters such as the extent to which town bypasses and selected improvements to the existing A5 standard would meet or fail to meet the overall aim and objectives of the dual carriageway scheme, together with an assessment of their environmental effects. I have instructed officials to carry out and then publish that assessment for consultation in accordance with the PAC recommendations.

**Mr Allister:** If Mr Edwin Poots is as good as his word, that will have been one of the last North/South meetings until the Union-dismantling protocol is, itself, dismantled. As an enthusiast for the Belfast Agreement, the Minister must know that it is said to be built on the equilibrium of sustaining east-west relations and North/South relations. With the key east-west economic relations having been trashed by the protocol, surely the Minister is not ignorant as to why it is necessary, from a unionist perspective, to ensure that North/South relations do not continue as though that trashing of east-west relations had not occurred.

**Ms Mallon:** If east-west relations have been trashed, in the Member's analysis — I do not agree with it — the reality is that that is due to Brexit. We are in the current situation because the DUP mishandled Brexit at Westminster. I do not need to rehearse the arguments, because we all know that they are there. It does not matter how we try to spin that: it is there for all to see.

As a Minister, I do not have a pick-and-mix approach to my legal obligations. As Minister for Infrastructure, I have been proactive in my east-west engagement. I have had numerous meetings with colleagues in the Department for Transport and Robin Walker. I have had meetings with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I have had meetings with my counterparts in Scotland and Wales, because I recognise that we have shared challenges and that they are best overcome when we work together. I also do it because I am legally obliged to fulfil my obligations when it comes to my interactions, North/South and east-west.

I understand that the DUP has new leadership, but, regardless of who the leader is, they have legal responsibilities. I am so concerned by that particular issue

that I have sought legal advice from the Attorney General on it.

**Mr Speaker:** Members, that concludes questions on the statement. Please, take your ease for a moment or two.

**Ms Anderson:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, when the Justice Minister was in the Chamber, I had my name down for a question. I was actually on StarLeaf, in the audience, waiting to be brought into the spotlight.

There was obviously some kind of technical fault that resulted in my not being able to ask a question to the Justice Minister. It was about a crucial issue. In the summer, two of my constituents were nearly burnt in a van that was hijacked in Galliagh, and they have been put through a number of hurdles trying to get compensation. I wanted to raise that with the Justice Minister in the Chamber yesterday, and I hope that I get another opportunity to do so. I want to explain to Members that it was not my fault that I did not get to ask a question yesterday, but, rather, it was some kind of technical fault.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for that. We are looking at the processes that occurred last evening. I will come back to you formally on that when we get to the bottom of the problem that was created.

## Executive Committee Business

### Budget 2021-22

**Mr Speaker:** The next item of business is a motion on the Budget 2021-22.

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** I beg to move

*That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2021-22 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 1 April 2021 and the further detailed information laid on 27 April 2021.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has allowed up to four and a half hours for the debate. Your amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

**Mr Murphy:** I also beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after "information" and insert:*

*"provided to Members on 27 April 2021 and laid on 19 May 2021."*

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. By convention, where a Member or Minister seeks to amend their own motion, they are invited to address both the motion and the amendment within the time allocated. The Minister will have 30 minutes to allocate at his discretion between proposing and winding up. The Chair of the Finance Committee will have 10 minutes in which to speak. All other Members will have seven minutes.

**Mr Murphy:** At the outset of today's debate, I will address the amendment to the motion. Following Executive agreement to the final Budget of 2021-22 last month, I provided both a written and an oral statement to the House. At the time of my oral statement, Members were also provided with a detailed Budget document. That document was not officially laid at the time, resulting in the amendment to today's motion, which reflects the actual date when the Budget document was laid in the Assembly.

Members will know that I had hoped for early confirmation of a multi-year Budget. That would have provided Departments with greater certainty and facilitated the longer-term planning of services; instead, on 25 November, we were provided with a single-year Budget. I discussed that with Rishi Sunak in London a couple of weeks ago, and he confirmed his intention to move to a multi-year Budget in the next spending review. I very much welcome that.

In summary, the Executive were provided with an increased capital envelope but a standstill budget in terms of resource spending. There was also a reduction in COVID funding. The Executive published their draft Budget on 18 December 2020 and initiated a short period of consultation that closed on 25 February 2021. The consultation revealed three consistent priorities: health, education and social and economic recovery from the pandemic. Despite the challenging financial position, those priorities are reflected in the Executive's final Budget. Health has been allocated nearly 50% of the resource budget and £430 million of additional COVID funding. That includes funding for Health and Social Care (HSC) workers and the roll-out of the hugely successful vaccination programme. A further £20 million has been allocated for safe staffing.

The Budget also prioritises funding for children and young people, given the huge impact that COVID has had on their well-being. Education has received 18% of the resource budget and £103 million of COVID funding. That includes childcare sector support and funding for the Engage programme, which helps to address the disruptive impact of COVID-19 on learning. A further £35 million has been allocated for teachers' pay.

On social and economic recovery, the Department for the Economy's recovery plan has been funded in full. The package of almost £300 million includes £145 million for the high street voucher scheme, which will act as a stimulus in our town centres and high streets. Funding has been provided for the Job Start programme, which will create opportunities for people aged 16 to 24 who are at risk of long-term unemployment.

Rates have been frozen for households and businesses at a cost of £230 million. The rates holiday for the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic has been extended for a further year.

I will now take Members through some of the detail. There have been four main changes since the draft Budget. Following the reassessment of all central items, £7.1 million was released and has now been allocated. Further funding of £411.9 million was announced as part of the Chancellor's Budget on 3 March. Of that, some £224 million was a consequence of additional health spending in England. The £126.9 million of COVID funding that was held at draft Budget stage to allow time to assess the changing course of the pandemic and, consequently, the needs of the Departments has been allocated in the final Budget. In addition, following negotiation, Treasury agreed that funding for COVID-19 that was provided in late 2020-21 can be carried forward into 2021-22. That equates to £238 million resource, £75 million capital DEL and £14 million financial transactions capital (FTC). That is in addition to the normal Budget exchange scheme amounts that will be made available in the June monitoring exercise.

Although that funding was confirmed by Treasury, the Secretary of State did not write to confirm it. Therefore, legally, that funding cannot be included in the final Budget outcome. The Secretary of State has still not confirmed the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) and confidence-and-supply money. However, in order to allow Departments to plan effectively, the Executive agreed a number of allocations as part of the final Budget process. While those are not in the Budget outcome for each Department, they are shown separately in the Budget document and will be in the Main Estimates and reflected in departmental outcomes at June monitoring.

Those changes have enabled the Executive to make additional allocations as part of the final Budget process, including £35 million, as I said, for teachers' pay; £20 million for safe staffing in the health service; £12.3 million to recruit an additional 100 PSNI officers; £1.4 million to extend the Bright Start school-age grant scheme, which provides much-needed support in disadvantaged areas, rural communities and the schools estate, as well as the holiday grant scheme for disabled children; £0.9 million for the public service route from Derry to London; and £0.16 million for the translation hub. While we have used flexibilities to stretch our Budget as far as possible, the general picture remains the same on resource spending: it is a flat-cash settlement that, effectively, means reductions

once increased costs and demands on services are taken into account. Ministerial colleagues will therefore need to prioritise their budgets.

The capital budget is much more positive, and that will help to stimulate economic activity as we move into the recovery phase. Between the draft Budget and the final Budget, the Executive have borrowed a further £30 million from the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) facility, bringing the total up to £170 million. The use of RRI will be monitored throughout the year. If it is not needed, it will not be drawn down.

The Executive allocated a record £722.5 million capital to the Department for Infrastructure. That is 40% of the total capital and an increase of £164 million or 29% on the previous year. Over £160 million has been provided for new social housing, which is an increase of over 11% on last year. A total of £111.9 million has been committed to deliver flagship projects. The Department of Health has been provided with £32.6 million for the mother and children's hospital and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service's learning and development centre. The Department for Communities has £20 million to deliver the redevelopment of Casement Park stadium. The Department for Infrastructure has £6 million to deliver the A5 project.

#### 11.15 am

Members will know that we have had some difficulty lending out financial transactions capital. Some £73.6 million of FTC is available this year, and it has been allocated in full in the final Budget: £38.8 million has gone to the Department for Communities for housing, and £34.7 million has gone to the Department for the Economy for business support loans. I commend those Departments for making use of that lending facility.

With a standstill Budget from Westminster, our public services will remain under pressure. However, the Executive have used their carry-over flexibility and borrowing capacity to increase investment in economic and social recovery. This is a Budget that, in difficult circumstances, progresses many of the NDNA commitments, and it will have a positive impact on workers and families.

I look forward to the debate, and I commend the Budget to the Assembly.

**Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance):** Thank you very much indeed, Minister, for your remarks.

I thank the Minister for his opening remarks and for bringing the debate to the Assembly today, even though no notice of the debate was provided in his recent and regular correspondence with the Committee for Finance. Although Members will welcome enhanced scrutiny and greater transparency and even an extra opportunity to question the Minister a little today, I suspect that some of us may struggle to make remarks that differ significantly from those that we will make in the Supply resolution and Budget Bill debates that, I suspect, will take place in only two weeks' time. I understand that this debate serves a different function from the others. However, there may be some merit in considering streamlining the process and removing any possible duplication, without, of course, truncating the Assembly's necessary and proper consideration of the Budget.

I know that the Minister is sincere in his desire to see enhanced Assembly scrutiny. I know also that, for that reason, he has established the interim fiscal council. On another day, the Committee may elect to bring to the House a debate of its own on that subject. Perhaps we might then determine the views of the House on how we can establish an independent fiscal council with the functionality, discretion, powers, independence, competence, credibility and engagement with the Assembly to facilitate improved understanding and ownership of the complexities of the Budget process. In the meantime, we might question the effectiveness of our existing approach, with its limited granularity, occasional evasions and obfuscations from Departments and, let us be frank, the impenetrable nature of much of the documentation that is provided to us.

For now, I turn to the subject matter of the motion, namely the spending programme for 2021-22. The documentation mentioned in the motion and laid on 19 May indicates a £13 billion resource budget and around £1.8 billion in capital. It is understood that the new resource baseline is, however, just under £12 billion. Members are aware that a further £687.4 million was to be allocated in in-year monitoring, plus the additional COVID resource allocation that was announced in a written statement last week.

Mr Speaker, I do not mind telling you that multiple spending rounds, though extremely welcome to the recipient Departments, are hard to track. The failure of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to sign off on those important allocations has also served to deny the Assembly certainty and clarity on those significant sums. The Department has advised that a similar situation applies to the £360 million of New Decade, New Approach and confidence-and-supply funding. I understand that, although that money is not yet confirmed, it is expected to be paid and thus appears in the Main Estimates as departmental headroom. Regrettably, the £19 million of payments to victims is also treated as headroom, rather than confirmed expenditure, in the Estimates. Perhaps the Minister, in his response, will address all those areas of uncertainty in the 2021-22 spending programme, particularly in respect of victims. Will he update the House on the issues with the Secretary of State and indicate where the hold-up lies?

The Minister has been talking about top-slicing, but the alternative of top-slicing Departments to the tune of many tens of millions of pounds each would, quite frankly, be completely untenable.

With the other undetermined financial matters, can the Minister advise on the balance of the £200 million New Deal for Northern Ireland funding? It was understood that the UK Government were perhaps considering revising the governance arrangements for that. Will the Minister therefore advise whether he expects Departments to enjoy enhanced financial visibility in respect of related allocations from HM Treasury?

When the Minister last provided a statement, he indicated that he hoped that, if Departments kept to their spending commitments, there would be a limited loss of funding from the Northern Ireland block for 2020-21. Will the Minister confirm whether that is indeed the case?

After all that, it would be remiss of me not to commend the many measures brought forward by the Executive to

manage the pandemic and boost the economy as we all recover from a significant community and national trauma. On behalf of the Committee, I record our appreciation of the multiple business support packages, including the rates holiday, the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) and the other retail, hospitality and tourism grants provided by the Minister's Department through Land and Property Services (LPS) and the Department for the Economy. I hope that those, coupled with the Job Start scheme, will make a real and measurable difference to hard-pressed businesses and families as lockdown ends and we hopefully confine it to history. However, the Committee and, indeed, the rest of the Assembly wait with keen interest to see how the high street voucher scheme and related schemes will be rolled out.

The subject of the debate is the 2021-22 Budget. However, we all know that coming round the corner is another challenging HM Treasury spending review. We all suspect that that may prove difficult for the Northern Ireland block. I ask the Minister whether the Department is preparing for that and urging other parts of the Executive to consider cost reductions and efficiency measures for 2022-23 that might reduce our cost base. I think particularly about the disposal of underutilised office space and the hard charging of Departments for leasehold costs.

Although the Committee for Finance has not formally considered the motion, I think that I am correct in saying that, on balance, it would give it its cautious support.

I will say a few words in my capacity as the Ulster Unionist finance spokesman. Were it not for the additional in-year and carry-over of COVID funding, there is no doubt that the tone of the debate would be very different. The UK Government, directly through the job retention scheme and indirectly through additional allocations to the Northern Ireland Executive, have contributed in the region of £3.8 billion to our efforts to tackle the pandemic. That demonstrates clearly, once again, the benefits of Northern Ireland remaining a constituent nation of the United Kingdom.

It would be remiss of me not to revisit the Health budget. Our waiting times are atrocious; we heard more about them in the media this morning. There are many causes for the situation that we are in, but a decade of underinvestment and poor political leadership are the two key reasons that stick in my mind. People are coming to harm — real harm. I welcome the efforts of the Health Minister and congratulate him on how he has got the entire HSC family, including senior clinicians, breaking down old barriers and obstacles. However, making a lasting impact will require more than one year's breathing space. The entire Executive, backed by the Assembly, as it has said it would time and time again, need to realise that only so much can happen with single-year, non-recurrent funding. Our health workers bravely tackled the worst of the COVID pandemic, so let us now help them to tackle the waiting lists.

**Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):** Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the final Budget on behalf of the Committee for Communities. The Committee received a written submission and briefing from officials on 20 May, and it realises that the Department is allocating its resources to protect key services. I reaffirm the Committee's commitment to work with the Minister and her Department

within its budget allocation and on delivering her overarching strategy for 2020-25: building inclusive communities.

The Committee wishes to express its dissatisfaction with the overall Budget process, however. Some aspects were outside the Executive's control, but others were not. The Budget process is also running somewhat late, and this debate is now out of line with the Committee's consideration of the Budget. I have to speak today before the Committee has had a chance to finalise its response to the Committee for Finance.

The Committee shares the Minister of Finance's hopes that this one-year Budget is indeed the bridge to a multi-year Budget. The Committee wishes to highlight the fact that the Department for Communities provides many life-changing support programmes and services that need the continuity of funding that one-year Budgets simply cannot provide. The Department's 2021-22 allocation is around £876 million of resource DEL, which, thankfully, is an increase on the £824 million in the draft Budget; almost £225 million of capital DEL, which is an increase of over £10 million on last year's allocation; and £38.8 million in financial transactions capital. The final Communities budget represents an over £55 million increase on the baseline draft Budget, which is mainly because of a number of COVID bids being met. That is still far from what is needed, but it goes some way towards easing the Committee's dismay at the draft Budget. The final Budget is still challenging, and there is absolutely no funding for the Department to take forward many NDNA commitments. The Department submitted resource bids of £301.6 million but was allocated only £109.6 million. That includes £48.2 million for existing welfare mitigations, while the remaining bids were for benefit delivery, new labour market interventions, homelessness and Supporting People. Thankfully, all those bids were met.

Over £132 million of resource bids were for COVID recovery, but only around half that total was met in the final Budget. At its meeting last Thursday, the Committee expressed concern that the resource bids that were not met covered key areas. Never mind a week being a long time in politics, Committee members were relieved to hear only one day later that the pressure had eased somewhat, when the Finance Minister confirmed additional funds for the Department of £50.3 million to address a range of COVID pressures, including £10 million to councils; £3 million to support council-managed community development and advice centres; £13 million to arts, culture and heritage; and £12 million to progress the Restart programme, which will support older people in returning to employment.

Last Thursday, the Committee queried the outcome of an efficiency exercise, and officials highlighted the fact that pressures have been addressed through £23.3 million of actions, including not filling over 320 vacant posts. That is the reality on the ground, and it means added pressure on existing staff and new work not being done. The Committee has requested a breakdown of the posts but was pleased to hear that that did not impact on the recruitment of 900 universal credit staff, with 367 in post and another 158 at the pre-appointment check stage.

Before I highlight specific areas, I note that the Committee has continued to keep a watch on the progress of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The Committee has learnt that,

of the £220 million Community Renewal Fund for pilot projects, there is only an £11 million allocation for Northern Ireland. That in no way seems sufficient for groups across all areas to run pilot projects.

The Committee has considered the resource allocations, including those for arm's-length bodies, and has noted that the Department has overcommitted by £2.5 million on the basis that it can be managed down in-year. As I have already said, the Committee is pleased that an additional £50.3 million has now been confirmed from COVID resources. The Committee was alarmed to hear, however, that the Department was having to rely on that exercise in the first place.

The Committee has engaged with the Department on numerous occasions on welfare delivery and on labour market interventions, particularly the Job Start scheme. Thankfully, the final Budget now meets the substantial bids of almost £27 million and £25 million respectively for labour market interventions and benefit delivery.

The Committee is aware that the Department's annually managed expenditure (AME) is outside the block grant.

Nevertheless, it remains concerned about the link between the success of labour market interventions and the level of AME spend interventions that are needed to get people back into work and off benefits. The budget for Supporting People is £73 million for 2021-22. The bid of almost £6 million for COVID pressures has been met as one of the confirmed in-year allocations. Unfortunately, the almost £6.5 million inflationary bid has not been met so, in real terms, the decrease for this vital programme continues.

### 11.30 am

I am running out of time so I will move on to New Decade, New Approach. The Department made bids totalling £130 million, and only the £42.8 million bid for existing welfare mitigations has been met. That has raised concern because there are other issues such as social strategies, language strategies and a very important sign language framework. When the Committee held its briefing with the deaf community, it showed that we really need to have that in place.

Finally, the Committee looks forward to engaging with the Department on the June monitoring round. However, although that is a substantial pot, we expect that much of it is already spoken for.

**Mr McHugh:** Ba mhaith liom fosta buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Budget for 2021-22. I commend the Minister of Finance for bringing forward the Budget in the most challenging of circumstances.

We all know the scale of the damage that the pandemic has inflicted on our society in both human and economic terms. Thousands of jobs have been lost in the last year, with many more workers uncertain if their jobs will survive when the furlough scheme ends. The number of people claiming universal credit has doubled since the start of the pandemic, and this will no doubt continue to rise in the months ahead. Tough but necessary restrictions were imposed on businesses, requiring them to close for long periods. Unfortunately, many will not be in a position to reopen now that the restrictions have been relaxed. We

have seen an unprecedented level of Government support to those businesses and self-employed individuals who have been most affected by the pandemic, with over £3 billion spent on COVID support funding so far. This support has meant that bills could be paid and food put on the table, but we must also acknowledge the hardship felt by families who have been forced to get by on much-reduced incomes. We also saw huge levels of funding directed towards our hospitals and other health services. This was necessary to ensure that our healthcare staff had the resources to respond to the crisis and provide care to the many thousands of patients suffering from COVID and other illnesses. We owe them a debt of gratitude, and it is right that we acknowledge their contribution.

Thankfully, with the successful roll-out of the vaccine and the cooperation of the public, we are now in a much better place. I extend my best wishes to all those businesses that have opened up in recent weeks. We must now move to the next phase of the fight against COVID, which is all about rebuilding and repairing the long-term economic damage left behind by the pandemic.

We face many challenges that we must quickly get to grips with. It is in that context that this Budget is so important. The Minister has described this Budget as a "standstill Budget". Although we have seen further COVID Barnett consequentials since the first draft was considered, it is disappointing that the British Government have not provided a funding envelope that would enable us to have the ambitious investment Budget that is needed to stimulate significant levels of growth.

It is also disappointing that we still do not have a multi-year Budget settlement to allow more strategic planning, despite a commitment to deliver this in New Decade, New Approach. In the case of Health in particular, I know, from listening to health professionals, that they require that for the development of the health service and so that they can address their ever-increasing waiting lists. In fact, only last week, one constituent had it confirmed that he could be waiting for up to six years for a hernia operation. It reminds me of when I see an advertisement in a supermarket that says, "Bananas: 2p for a pound", but there are no bananas. That seems to be very much the case in our health service now. While it is the case that it is free at the point of entry, it is not in a fit state to deliver the service that the public require and demand. It is central government that can step up to the plate and assist our Minister and the Executive to help to deliver the kind of service that we all hope for.

Despite the limited level of funding available, there is much to be positive about in the Budget, and I believe that it provides the basis for a fair economic recovery. I commend the Minister for securing £230 million of COVID support funding for rates relief, which will benefit thousands of our businesses. A 12-month rates holiday will provide some breathing space, particularly for the hospitality, retail, tourism, manufacturing and childcare sectors. Those sectors have been hit very hard by the pandemic, and we must do all that we can to help them to get back on their feet.

I also welcome the allocation of £275 million to the Department for the Economy for an economic recovery package, which will help to kick-start the recovery. Part of that includes £150 million for a high street voucher scheme, and I look forward, as do the public, to that being rolled out in the coming months.

Young people have been among the worst affected by the pandemic, with many losing their part-time jobs while struggling to pay for accommodation and student fees. I am therefore delighted to see that £20 million has been allocated to the Department for Communities for the Job Start scheme, which will assist our young people in getting back into work.

The Department for Infrastructure has been allocated £722 million of capital DEL, which is the biggest capital allocation in recent years. That substantial budget, along with an additional £170 million of reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing, will provide an immediate boost to our construction industry and provide many jobs. We need to see the delivery of key flagship infrastructure projects, such as the A5, which is in my constituency, Casement Park in west Belfast, more social housing units and major repair works on rural roads.

Brexit is still a key concern going forward, with little or no detail to date on exactly how much of the EU structural funding will be replaced and to what extent our devolved Ministers will have the authority to access the replacement funding when it does arrive. I welcome the allocation of £35 million from the British Government to assist in the implementation of the protocol, which will minimise the worst effects of Brexit. Only today, the European Commission emphasised again that the problem is not the protocol; the problem is Brexit.

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

**Mr McHugh:** I will finish my remarks on an optimistic note. Although it may take some time to recover from the pandemic, the path to recovery is laid before us. Tá mé an-sásta go bhfuil muid ag gabháil chun cinn céim ar chéim. I am very happy that we are going forward step by step.

**Mr O'Toole:** When we debate the Budget in the Assembly, be it via a Budget Bill or, as we have today, a Budget statement, I often pause to consider why we are here. We are supposed to be here to effect improvement in the lives of the people whom we represent. Whatever our differences on the constitution or other issues, we should be here to find constructive solutions to the problems that our citizens face.

Those problems include the fact that one in four — one in four — of our citizens is on a waiting list. Our waiting lists are the worst on these islands and are among the worst in Europe. We should all be ashamed of that. Since we restarted here in January 2020, there have been multiple budgetary events. There have been two full Budget statements, both in draft and final form, and several Budget Bills and associated Supply resolutions. In none of them have we seen anything approaching a coherent plan to address the major crises facing our public services, most notably our waiting list crisis.

Given that we have spent most of the past year dealing with the pandemic, it was understandable that we did not have much of a coherent vision or strategy from the Minister last year, but it is now nearly summer 2021. Governments all over the world have managed to produce coherent plans to match finances to priorities. Why not us? People in Northern Ireland, especially people who have been languishing for years waiting for surgery, will ask why we cannot have a Government that produces plans to deal with our actual problems rather than simply getting mired

in improvised allocations — I welcome allocations; we can all welcome allocations — short-termism and blame-shifting.

First, it is worth addressing a key point that the Minister has made and will no doubt make again, which is that London presented the Executive with a near standstill Budget, that there was limited room for manoeuvre for the Minister and that the failure to deliver a multi-year spending review limited the capacity to make multi-year allocations, including to the health service. I am in no doubt that the failure of the Treasury to provide a multi-year spending review has limited our options. I acknowledge that, but I come back to the point: why are we even here? What is the point in having a Finance Minister and an Executive when they will not offer a vision for how we might fund these crises in the future? Minister, the Treasury might provide the overall envelope, but it does not make the allocations, and it does not write this Budget.

This document could have provided a template multi-annual Budget and encouraged political debate on the trade-offs that we all face. The Sinn Féin manifesto in 2017 promised a billion pounds for the health service. Minister, what is the view on how we deliver that and why is it not set out, at least in draft, in this Budget? We could have had a debate today on the hard choices that we face in dealing with the big challenges of waiting lists, post-COVID recovery and a just transition to a lower-carbon future, but, apparently, that is not our job or the Minister's job. The money comes from London and the bids for funding come from other Ministers.

**Mr Muir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Toole:** I will give way briefly.

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with the points that he is outlining. Will he also agree that fundamental to that is us in this place taking on our responsibilities to deliver upon the commitments that we signed up to in Bengoa?

**Mr O'Toole:** Yes, I do agree with that.

The job of the Finance Department and the Finance Minister is to set strategic direction and vision. I am afraid that there is none of that in this document.

Minister, one of the big economic questions facing all of us in this century is about the rise of automation and the jobs in which humans might be replaced by robots in the future. Judging by this Budget, we might want to explore whether we could simply allocate the Finance Minister's job to a robot that could move information between London and Belfast. I see that we already have a robotic lawnmower operating today at the front of the Stormont estate, so perhaps the robots are ready for a promotion. Perhaps, if 'Star Wars' comes back to film in Ireland, we can ask whether R2-D2 fancies a stint as Finance Minister. That is not to be flippant but simply to say that we are here for a reason: to take responsibility for improving our citizens' lives, rather than associating ourselves with allocations for the purposes of photo opportunities, then blaming the Treasury or other Ministers when problems arise.

I want to come to a couple of other critical points.

**Mr McNulty:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Toole:** I will give way very briefly.



**Mr McNulty:** Will the Member agree that this Budget from the Sinn Féin Finance Minister does very little to give comfort to families who are on their hands and knees on waiting lists to get operations to stop the pain that is besetting them day in and day out? This Budget does nothing to give them comfort.

**Mr O'Toole:** I agree that we should have seen more of a vision set out in this document.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will have an extra minute.

**Mr O'Toole:** I want to come on to couple of other critical points before I finish. This Budget highlights the real shortfall in funding created by the EU exit. There is no clarity on the long-term funding loss created by Brexit. DAERA has confirmed in this document that £14.4 million in EU funding for direct farm payments has not been met by the UK Government, nor has £5.1 million for disease eradication.

For the Department for the Economy, the document makes clear that we need replacement EU funding of £5 million a year. We have heard already from the Chair of the Communities Committee about issues with the shared prosperity fund. Minister, we could have done with a single table setting out those challenges in this document. We could have had a chapter detailing the damage done by Brexit and how we are going to deal with it, including by taking advantage of our position vis-à-vis the protocol at the crossroads of two major markets. However, there is little sign of strategy or agency in this document.

Lastly, Minister, I am, of course, obliged to mention my habitual subject, the Sammy tax: £2.5 million a year to subsidise non-existent long haul flights in the midst of economic and waiting list crisis. Minister, while we will not be pushing this Budget to a vote, we do have significant concerns about some of the contents of this passive, robotic Budget statement. As I said, it fails to address the crisis in waiting lists, it fails to properly address our economic recovery and it fails to properly —

**A Member:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Toole:** I am coming to the end of my statement, so I will not, I am afraid.

It fails to properly address Brexit. I am afraid that, for all of us, it simply is not good enough going forward.

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

**11.45 am**

**Mr Muir:** As the Alliance Party's finance spokesperson, I will speak on and support the motion. I will touch on the contributions of two Members, and the first is that of the Chair of the Finance Committee, Dr Steve Aiken, about the need to streamline the budgetary process.

I became an MLA in December 2019, and my term has been most unusual. We had two months of normality — that is, if you could call it “normality”, in that these institutions were restored — and then we had COVID-19. I have never experienced what might be considered a normal Budget process. Thus far, I have seen an elongated, baffling process that is difficult for me, never mind for members of the public, to make sense of.

The Alliance Party has no member on the Finance Committee, so, without having access to the Committee

papers, I am inhibited in my ability to provide scrutiny in the Chamber. If I may speak for members of other parties, none of whom are here during this important debate, I will say that they do not have access to those papers either. That is a fundamental issue that has to be examined by the Assembly authorities. I have written to them on numerous occasions about that.

We are now coming towards the end of May, and, very soon, it will be June, yet the Department for Infrastructure has still not confirmed its budget. We are two months into the financial year. No other business would run its operation like that. The same is true of other Departments, so I am not getting at Nichola Mallon. It is just not a sensible way to run our finances.

Also, we do not have multi-year Budgets. If anyone was listening to ‘Good Morning Ulster’ this morning, they would have heard about the impact of COVID-19, the state of the health service and the impact on individuals, and they would know that it was heart-rending to hear some of the stories. Waiting lists are so long that some doctors do not even tell patients how long they will be waiting because it has no meaning. We have a two-tier health service where, if you can afford to go private, you can get your treatment, but if you have to rely on the NHS, you will not get treatment for many years. So many people rely on the NHS, yet it was founded to serve the people. The waiting lists are for not weeks or months but years.

There is a need for multi-year Budgets. I take on board some of what Matthew O'Toole said about the health service, but the need for multi-year Budgets also relates to Treasury and the fact that it did not come forward with the much-promised multi-year Budgets that were outlined some time ago.

However, to constantly pass the buck and the blame back to Treasury does not cut the mustard. We have devolved institutions, Departments and an Assembly. We in Northern Ireland have the power to effect change. We agreed the Bengoa report, a key element in reforming the operation of the health service. One person said this morning, “It is not just money that is required, it is also reform.”

I agree that significant investment in the health service is required. I know that at first hand from my mother, who used to work in the health service, but there is also a need for reform. As we signed up to the Bengoa report, we need to show leadership and deliver upon it. Time and time again, we see situations where difficult decisions are to be made, but people are not prepared to follow through. Such debates have already occurred in the Chamber. We need to show responsibility, and that goes not just for the Finance Minister but for all Departments and MLAs.

I welcome the establishment of the Fiscal Council, but we need clarity about the role it will play in the budgetary process. Today is just the start of the elongated Budget process, and although I am speaking on the Budget, I do not hold out much hope that Members will stick to the topic and will not get sidetracked by other issues in this debate, the debate on the Budget Bill and debates on further Budget Bills. We need to understand how the Budget process will be better and different now that the Fiscal Council has been established.

We have a Programme for Government, but the fact that the Budget does not link through to it in order to ensure a

connection to goals and outcomes is a matter of concern. The best example of that, which was outlined yesterday and again today, is electric vehicle charging. Responsibility for that falls between two Departments, so what happens? Nothing. That is what happens. We then have a situation where people do not want to take responsibility to drive forward that programme because it requires cooperation. If we had an outcomes-based Programme for Government that was linked to the Budget, we would have a very different outcome on that.

I welcome the decision to borrow £170 million. We did not utilise that borrowing in the last financial year. It is critical that the Government learn to spend and invest that money better. The Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, which I sit on alongside Matthew, Maoliosa and others, have conducted inquiries, most recently into the capacity and capability of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The Committee published its report on that last week. I am grateful for the work that has been done by civil servants, who have gone above and beyond the call of duty over the last year and before. Their efforts have been immense. However, if we are to ensure that this investment is realised, we need to address the recommendations in that report and in a previous report on major capital projects. I fear that those reports are produced, inquiries take place, and the reports then gather dust. If we are to ensure that those reports have meaning, we need to take action.

One example of that would be the establishment of an infrastructure commission. Why can we not establish that during this mandate? It must be established. It does not have to be established under legislation initially, but it needs to be established. We need to drive that forward. Something that always comes up in Budget debates is who will pay for it. About half a billion pounds is wasted every year on the cost of division. That is a clear example of how we can invest in the services that we need and realise those changes.

In conclusion, I support the motion. The Alliance Party is part of an Executive. It supported the Budget process in that Executive and will support it today. However, it is important that we also take those difficult decisions.

**Mr Frew:** First, I raise a certain truth in the House. When it comes to Budget debates or legislation, it is clear that:

*"The needle returns to the start of the song  
And we all sing along like before."*

It seems that nothing ever changes. We all have the same frustrations and raise the same points, yet nothing seems to change. I must say that it was quite refreshing to hear Luke Skywalker in the corner [*Laughter*] although, at times, he sounded more like Chewbacca. He alluded to another truth: we all need the wisdom of Yoda in times of stress such as these.

Once again, the Budget highlights the overwhelming financial contributions that the Government make to Northern Ireland. That is an undeniable fact. The financial benefits of our membership of the UK are invaluable to public services and the economy in Northern Ireland. The additional contributions to fund the pandemic response underlined that. That must be put into context. The UK has experienced the largest fall in output for more than 300 years and will not return to pre-crisis levels until at

least quarter 4 of 2022. No doubt, that will mean some economic scarring, which will lead to unemployment levels rising in the coming months. Where in the Budget, in the drafts or new version, do people find hope, inspiration and confidence?

I heard a number of colleagues in the Chamber talk about the hard times and the difficult role that the Finance Minister will have with a standstill Budget. May I let you into a secret? The people out there, who have just about managed in the past year, are not standing still; they are going backwards. They are losing capital quickly, they are spending their savings at an unbelievable rate, and they do not see hope in this document. Where is the inspiration? Where is the confidence for those hard-pressed families? I smile a wry smile when I hear Ministers — the Finance Minister and all other Ministers — talking about standstill, challenging budgets. Out there in the real world, mums and dads just have to get on with it and deal with the hand that they have been dealt. They look to us to give them hope, inspiration and confidence.

The same can be said about waiting lists in our Health Department. We have lived through a pandemic. There is no doubt about that, and it was probably the most challenging time in our political careers. However, in the heat of that battle, where was the drive and vision to fix things? There is little evidence that we have achieved anything in our health service other than treading water and sinking deeper into the mire. When will it change? When can we stand up and say to our people, "We can fix this. Have confidence in us. Here is the hope and inspiration". That said, it is difficult not having a multi-year Budget; I get that. However, even if we go to a multi-year Budget, how can we ensure that the same things that we do annually will not happen on a three-year basis? That should give us more latitude to input a long-term strategic vision to those difficult decisions, but there is no guarantee. If the model is not fixed, how do we move forward?

Today, you will hear about the broken Budget process from many Committee Chairs. The process is broken, and it does not allow Committees to scrutinise properly or input strategic thought. That is a massive problem. My colleague Paula Bradley, the Chair of the Communities Committee, outlined that problem, as will others today. I congratulate my colleague Paula on her new role as deputy leader. I wish her all the best in the future.

Here we are again with a one-year Budget, and I understand the pressure that that brings. Over the year, we have seen the way in which in-year monitoring rounds have not really worked for us, because of decisions that are taken and, almost as importantly, decisions that are not taken. Committees find it difficult and struggle to scrutinise those decisions.

The rates holiday is a big thing for business. It was massive last year, and I commend the Finance Minister and the Executive for that decision. I commend the Finance Minister for the decision to extend the rates holiday to this year. However, that will not grow business; it just allows business to survive. The rates holiday is the difference between a business being here and not being here. Businesses want inspiration and promises of growth. They want promises that, in this place, we have the remedies to fix the problems that we face this year. I am not sure whether businesses will see that, but I hope

that they do. I hope that, if we do not have the answers, government stays out of the face of businesses and allows unrestricted operation so that they can trade safely and bring growth to the economy and our people. We need business to do that.

We should not ignore the damage that the Northern Ireland protocol does to this country and to east-west trade. It has a massive bearing on us as we go forward, no matter what our Budget line or process is. The protocol will be diabolical —

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

**Mr Frew:** — for the future, and it should be removed in its entirety so that we in Northern Ireland can enjoy the benefits of a free United Kingdom.

**Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** We continue to be in exceptional times with annual Budgets and a reliance on ministerial directions to implement COVID relief schemes. It is not an ideal context for a Committee to scrutinise a departmental budget effectively. However, the Economy Committee has received regular budget briefings from the Department. Over the past year, the Committee has had regular engagement with officials about budgeting. Most recently, on 12 May, the Economy Minister briefed the Committee about her spending plans in the economic recovery action plan and the 10X economic vision.

As with other Departments, the Economy budget has flatlined in 2021-22. That has resulted in the Department realigning budget lines and beginning the financial year with an overcommitment of £7.3 million. Officials reassured the Committee that the overcommitment was manageable. The Department has also received £12.2 million from the Treasury to manage protocol issues, and the Committee will monitor that closely over the next few months as the impact of Brexit continues to unfold.

#### 12.00 noon

A key element of the Department's budgeting for 2021-22 is the economic recovery action plan, which the Executive have agreed to fund at a cost of approximately £290 million in resource funding, with £11 million of capital spend. Roughly half the resource allocation for the economic recovery action plan will go to the high street stimulus voucher scheme. I will comment on that later.

The Department has secured £23 million from the NIO, with £8 million of that to support the development of Invest NI locations overseas over the next two years and the other £15 million for skills, which is to be spread over the next three years. In addition to the economic recovery action plan, there is a range of New Decade, New Approach commitments that are relevant to the Economy Department. The Department and the Executive must ensure that the commitments in the economic recovery action plan, 'New Decade, New Approach' and the Programme for Government are closely aligned. Failure to align the work of all Departments runs the risk of duplication or failure to maximise the impact of spending. The economic recovery action plan highlights in particular the Department's key commitments on strategies for skills, energy and the economy more widely, as well as on further and higher education. The Department has suggested that the economic recovery action plan and the

recently published 'A 10X Economy' have the potential to be game changers for our economy. The Committee will, however, be looking for clearer delivery on what are very high level statements of intent. Funding for those, and for other departmental strategies, will come from in-year allocations, and the Committee will want to see as much detail on those as possible. This is not a time for lack of transparency.

The high street stimulus voucher scheme, which I mentioned earlier, represents some £145 million of spending. That is roughly half of the economic recovery action plan's overall funding. It is therefore vital that the scheme be successful and that it provide the economic stimulus that is expected. Officials have briefed the Committee on the scheme, but there are many aspects of it on which specifics are still lacking, with elements of the policy still to be pinned down. The Committee will be watching the implementation of the scheme carefully, and members are heavily engaged with stakeholders to provide as much advice as possible.

The Committee has flagged its concern to the Department about funding being made available for schemes to reskill and upskill workers who cannot return to jobs once the furlough scheme has ended. The Executive must consider how support can be funded and put in place when that happens in the autumn.

In their recent briefings to the Committee, Department for the Economy officials have suggested that they are optimistic about the Department's budget situation for 2021-22. It is likely that the sizeable allocations beyond the Department's static baseline have encouraged that optimism. Contingency funding is also in place to mitigate the impacts of the protocol and departure from the EU. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

I will now make a few remarks as Sinn Féin economy spokesperson. I will not repeat any of the detail that has been outlined. Beyond the standstill departmental budget, as has been described, funding has been allocated to deal with the outworkings of Brexit, and there have been significant allocations to the economic recovery action plan. That money, more than half of which is going to the high street voucher scheme, is going to be vital in supporting our economy in its recovery. As I have said, we need to hear more details about the voucher scheme as quickly as possible. When departmental officials briefed the Committee on the budget, they said:

*"just short of £131 million has been allocated to be used at DFE's discretion for economic support measures."*

As we saw last year with the COVID support schemes, some flexibility is useful in allowing money to be moved to where it is needed. I ask the Minister to clarify what "at DFE's discretion" means and whether business cases will be approved for schemes being developed.

We have talked about the furlough scheme a number of times in Budget debates, and my colleague Maoliosa McHugh mentioned it today. The furlough scheme is due to end at the end of September. Undoubtedly, there will be businesses that will not be in a position to bring back all their employees. I have talked to some businesses, including businesses in the tourism sector that rely on international visitors. They are not looking at recovery in

this year. What engagement has the Minister had with Treasury about furlough, including on issues to do with the employer contributions that will be required later in the summer? There are going to be businesses that will not be in a position to meet those contributions, and redundancies are likely to follow. It is therefore important that we call for some sector-specific flexibility for the furlough scheme.

It is not often that I agree with Mr Frew in a Budget debate, but I had a sense of déjà vu as well when I listened to some Members' contributions. I remind the Members who criticised the Budget process that the approach of having a rollover Budget was agreed by Executive Ministers in October. We all agree that it is important to align PFG outcomes with budgets. However, if Members are not happy with how the Budget process is being taken forward, they can raise their concerns within their parties. We would all like to see a more dynamic process.

**Mr Givan:** Before I comment on the Budget, I apologise for not being in my place during Justice Question Time yesterday. That was an oversight on my part.

I will make some remarks in my role as Chair of the Committee for Justice. The Committee was initially briefed on the Department's financial planning for the years ahead in early November 2020. At that time, the Committee heard that the Department faced inescapable resource DEL pressures of almost £60 million for the 2021-22 financial year. Officials advised that it would be difficult to absorb those pressures without impacting on frontline service delivery. The Department pointed out that those pressures should not be considered in isolation, but rather in the context of a baseline that has fallen by around 9% since 2011-12. I mentioned that in a previous debate, but I wanted to repeat it.

The Department provided details of the range of measures that spending areas have already taken to manage the reduced budget, along with the further measures that may be required in future across all spending areas. To help inform its consideration, the Committee used that information, along with information provided by the Department's non-departmental public bodies on their indicative allocations for the year ahead, which remain mostly unchanged in the final Budget allocations.

During an oral briefing on 29 April, the Committee was advised that the final budget position represented a small increase of £0.3 million to the draft allocation that was announced in January 2021. The £8 million for tackling paramilitary activity was removed from the baseline, to be held centrally by the Department of Finance. COVID funding of £7.7 million was received and will be allocated to the Police Service, the Prison Service, the Courts and Tribunals Service and smaller bodies. There were some technical transfers of just over £0.5 million. The Department will also receive an in-year allocation of £12.3 million for police staffing that, for technical reasons, could not be included in the final budget outcome.

After a critical examination, officials advised that the £55.7 million pressures that were identified in November have been reduced to £20 million, of which nearly £6 million relates to the Police Service. The Police Service also still has pressures of nearly £6 million for EU exit and £1.6 million for transformation. That brings the overall pressure that the Department currently faces to £27.7 million. The

draft capital allocation for the Department is £96.4 million, which is an increase of £8.3 million from the previous year. The Department believes that that allocation is sufficient to meet existing commitments and progress priority projects.

The Committee will not formally agree its response to the final Budget until Thursday, in line with the deadline that was set by the Committee for Finance. However, I will reflect on some of the key issues that were raised by Committee members during our discussions with officials. The Police Service provided information at the Policing Board about the measures that it may require in order to live within its indicative budget allocation. That was of particular concern to the Committee when considering the draft Budget allocation. Instead of working towards the New Decade, New Approach commitment to increase the number of police officers to 7,500, the staff complement would have been reduced by 300 police officers, bringing the number of police officers down to 6,700. I welcome the representations and the changes that have now been made whereby £12.3 million additional funding for the Police Service will address that issue. The Department advised that £9.8 million of that allocation will enable the Police Service to retain its current numbers and that £2.5 million of the allocation will facilitate the recruitment of 100 new officers in 2021-22. That puts it on a trajectory to meet the NDNA commitments in due course.

There will obviously be recurring costs beyond this year that the Department believes should be included in future baselines from 2022-23. The Finance Minister advised that future budgets will depend on funding being available and that it will be for the Executive to agree the allocations at that time. Therefore, we are still some way from meeting the NDNA target, but we have taken a step forward. As I mentioned, the Police Service still also faces a shortfall in funding for EU exit, and the Committee understands that discussions are ongoing with the Treasury to secure the balance of funding required for the forthcoming year.

At the meeting in April, because of the information that had been provided to us, much of the discussion with the officials focused on the Prison Service. Officials advised that jobs are not expected to be lost; rather new staff will not be recruited. That may not have an immediate impact as the Prison Service is close to its full staff complement, but, if it continues, that will have an impact over time. Members heard that other options may be considered to help the Prison Service to live within its budget, including relocating working out units back into prisons, reducing learning and skills provisions or closing down policy units. Such approaches, evidently, have an impact on rehabilitation, and that would have a negative impact, not only on prisoners but on their families, wider society and prison staff. As the official put it:

*"prisons operate most effectively when you have an appropriate number of staff per prisoner and appropriate activities for prisoners to be engaged in. Any reduction in one or the other will have a detrimental impact."*

The fact that the Prison Service could potentially get to that position is of particular concern to the Committee, and we will continue to consider that.

Other issues, such as those involving the Probation Board, were considered, but I want to conclude by mentioning the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme.

Members know that that scheme is set to open for applications on 30 June. Although it is the Department of Justice's responsibility to deliver the scheme —

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

**Mr Givan:** — responsibility for its funding rests with the Executive Office. It will not come out of the Department of Justice's budget, and I welcome the commitments that those costs will be met. However, I support the idea that this needs to be funded by Her Majesty's Treasury —

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

**Mr Givan:** — to support the Executive to fulfil their responsibilities in this area.

**Mr McAleer:** The AERA Committee recognises the significant pressure on future budget planning as a consequence of Brexit and the challenges posed by COVID-19 and the recovery from the pandemic. Whilst the Committee welcomes the continuation of recurrent funding for many of DAERA's core work programmes, there are several outstanding fiscal challenges that need to be urgently addressed in order to ensure that public bodies in rural communities are supported to recover and modernise in the next financial year.

The Committee particularly welcomes the planned investment of £9.8 million in 2021-22 to support the agri-food sector as it emerges from the pandemic and the resourcing of innovations such as the planned new surveillance scheme, which is co-led by DAERA and the Belfast Trust, to facilitate early detection of coronavirus in waste water outlets. However, our agriculture producers have been profoundly impacted by the downturn in market activity due to COVID, and it is vital that our farming industry has access to sufficient support in order to continue to deliver high-quality produce for consumers across the country and further afield.

The pressures on rural communities to modernise and innovate to tackle the challenges associated with climate change are significant, and, whilst the Committee welcomes the planned £2 million of investment in this financial year for green growth strategies, it is vital that the Department puts in place sufficient resources to support farming communities to transition to eco-friendly farming practices and ensures that innovations and best practice can be disseminated across the sector.

The biggest threat to our agriculture economy is from the many challenges and uncertainties posed by Brexit. Members will have heard the media reports in recent days about how the proposed free trade agreement between the British Government and Australia threatens to undermine the viability of farming communities across these islands. It is essential that our local farmers are supported with appropriate funding to remain accessible, competitive and sustainable in the years ahead, so that our high-quality agriculture produce can be traded effectively in our closest markets.

The Committee also recognises the additional requirements posed by the protocol. It is essential that DAERA is provided with the investment needed to ensure that sufficient resource and staffing levels are in place at our ports of entry to —.

## 12.15 pm

**Mr O'Toole:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the protocol, in addition to dealing with some of the checks required, also offers our farmers an opportunity to be protected from imports of cheap food? Those in the Chamber who supported Brexit might want to reflect on what they have done to farmers here. We see a cut in agricultural payments, which have not been replaced by the British Government, and we see a cheap food policy that will devastate farmers in Northern Ireland and Britain.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Tá bomaite breise agat. The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr McAleer:** I could not agree more with the Member. The protocol is in place to protect our farming communities and to facilitate and protect east-west trade. I welcome the fact that, recently, the European Commission encouraged the North of Ireland to be part of an all-island protected geographical indicator status for Irish grass-fed beef. That can only be made possible by the protocol.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McAleer:** Yes.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member care to reflect on the idiocy of what he has just said? He said that the protocol exists to protect east-west trade, but the protocol is, deliberately, the biggest barrier builder to east-west trade. Surely even the Member can grasp that and not lose his sense of reality as he fantasises in some euro-world.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I just remind Members — *[Interruption.]* No remarks from sedentary positions, please. I remind Members that the debate is principally about the Budget. Although the Brexit protocol has implications for that, I advise Members to steer back to the Budget debate.

**Mr McAleer:** Yes. The protocol will protect our farmers. We watch the British Government entertain trade deals with Australia, a huge beef-producing continent that wants unfettered access to the British market, which, of course, is our main market. When the British market becomes flooded with Australian beef — of course, that will be the precedent for trade deals with the USA and the Mercosur countries — with which we cannot compete, we will need the protocol. We need to work with the rest of the EU to access other EU markets and other opportunities across the globe, because we will be completely displaced from the British market. We need a protocol to protect our farmers and agri-food businesses here on the island of Ireland.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Member has made his point. Will he move back to focus on the Budget?

**Mr McAleer:** You can blame your colleague Mr O'Toole, and Mr Allister, for distracting me. *[Laughter.]* The continuation of the £18.8 million Brexit-related funding from last year is welcome but is insufficient to employ enough suitably trained staff to undertake checks at our ports. The Committee is particularly concerned about the projected £19.5 million shortfall in DAERA's budget this year to support farm payments that would have been delivered via EU funding. The deficit is the direct result of the Treasury's decision to net off £14.4 million of ring-fenced EU funding against other manifesto commitments and a failure to fund £5.1 million towards programmes to support

disease eradication. It is vital that that funding pressure be addressed in order to provide assurance to our rural communities and to ensure that they are supported at this particularly challenging time.

The Committee welcomes the planned capital investment of over £90 million in 2021-22 that will support improvements in research and development strategies, ICT infrastructure and rural development programmes. However, it is essential that the Department be supported to access any additional capital moneys that may become available over the next year to boost our rural development framework and ensure that our agriculture industry can continue to modernise its equipment, infrastructure and estate to deliver innovations and best practice.

The challenges that face our rural communities are stark and wide-ranging, and there are many uncertainties posed by Brexit, the outworking of the pandemic and the future transition to eco-friendly initiatives to address climate change. The Committee calls on the Minister and the Executive as a whole to ensure that our agri-food sector and its associated stakeholders are supported adequately to meet these challenges and to thrive in the coming years.

Briefly, in my role as Sinn Féin spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs, I underline the fact that Brexit is a huge threat to our sector. Of major concern last week was Minister Murphy's revelation that we have a £60 million hole in our budget this year as a consequence of lost EU funding that has not been replaced by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The £11 million Community Renewal Fund will not even be administered by the Executive here. The Brexiteers told us that they were "taking back control" and that there would be all these wonderful opportunities. This just exposes the lies and spin of Brexit because not only are we losing funding but we are losing the control to manage what funding is left.

To conclude, I thank you for your indulgence, and I support the motion.

**Ms McLaughlin:** This is not a good Budget. My colleague Matthew O'Toole stated the reasons why the Budget is beyond poor and inadequate and why the people of Northern Ireland deserve better. For the past 14 years, Northern Ireland has been led by joint First Ministers from Sinn Féin and the DUP. That leadership was supposed to deliver prosperity after the peace that was delivered by gigantic leaders such as John Hume of the SDLP. Instead of prosperity, the North continues to have some of the worst economic outcomes —.

**Dr Aiken:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms McLaughlin:** Yes.

**Dr Aiken:** For clarity, will you add David Trimble to that?

**Ms McLaughlin:** I will.

Instead of prosperity, the North continues to have some of the worst economic outcomes of anywhere in western Europe. My city of Derry has the highest levels of poverty, unemployment and economic inactivity, but it is not just Derry that is suffering. The situation is the same in Strabane, west Belfast and east Belfast. Those are the areas that have suffered most from the neglect of Sinn Féin and the DUP.

I will give you an example. It was 19 years ago that the British Government transferred the Fort George site

in Derry to the people of Derry. It was supposed to be transformational for Derry. There were plans to make it a marvellous example of how this place can move forward, exploiting a prime riverfront location that would make our people proud. Instead, it is almost empty. It is a telehouse for Project Kelvin — that is another disappointment for Derry — plus one Catalyst business incubation centre. That is all, unless you now include its use as a stacking area for McDonald's in order to eliminate the terrible risk of a car accident waiting to happen. Now we are merely waiting for Fort George or something to happen.

Yes, we have the promise of a health hub on the site, but, to be honest, we should all be fed up by now of promises being given but left unfulfilled. It is not just Derry, as I said. What about the other major site transferred into the care of our Government on behalf of our people? I am talking about the Maze site, which is a perfect metaphor for the joint Government of Sinn Féin and the DUP, with row followed by row and lack of delivery followed by lack of delivery.

That brings me to our universities. Making Derry a proper university city was one of the demands of the civil rights movement over 50 years ago. It is perhaps the only demand of the civil rights movement that has yet to be delivered. Despite 14 years of joint leadership by Sinn Féin and the DUP, that demand has yet to be delivered. There is crystal-clear evidence that expanding the higher education sector in Northern Ireland would be good for our economy, but the Government in Northern Ireland refuse to be evidence-led. If we had an evidence-led Government, the Finance Minister would put far more resources into skills and would recognise the result of holding down the size of our university sector. The result is not only economic harm but social harm: the dislocation of families, the loss of skills and the impact on innovation and invention, our cultural and arts sectors, civic life, wages, poverty and productivity. The list goes on. It all flows from the refusal to be led by evidence on expanding our university sector and from allowing the continuation of the brain drain, which results from having 60 university places for every 100 applications.

We have a bizarre situation here. The Sinn Féin spokesperson for higher education in the South is calling for more funded university places, and a Sinn Féin Minister here in the North is continuing to preside over a policy of capping university places that forces young people to leave the island, many never to return. There is no point in the Sinn Féin Finance Minister blaming the DUP Economy Minister for that failure. Two parties are in joint government. Two parties are in joint leadership of the Executive. They have been at it for 14 years. They have to step up and get things done. They have to put aside their constant mutual recriminations and stop the blame game.

I say this to the Sinn Féin Finance Minister: he should be more than a pawn or, as my colleague said, a robot that delivers on behalf of the British Treasury. He needs to be a leader. He needs to think for himself and do more than just accept how things were done in the past and how the British Government want him to act. He needs to deliver for the North and Ireland, not for the British Government. He needs to stop playing fiddle to the British Treasury and start to put a vision for Northern Ireland front and centre.

**Dr Archibald:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Ms McLaughlin:** He needs to help to build this place that we call home.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** There is a point of order.

**Ms McLaughlin:** In the past, the two largest parties —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Will the Member resume her seat, please? There is a point of order.

**Dr Archibald:** Is this not supposed to be a Budget debate?

**Ms McLaughlin:** This is about the Budget: it is about how we allocate money in this place. I am talking directly about the Budget and the lack of investment in skills and education, including higher education, in Northern Ireland that has been going on for 14 years. I am entitled to explain what is actually happening here to the people of Northern Ireland, should they care to listen.

**Mr McNulty:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms McLaughlin:** Yes, I will.

**Mr McNulty:** It is clear that Sinn Féin does not like the truth. Sinn Féin and the DUP are in it together. For the past 14 years, they have held this place back. It is time for change. Choose change.

**Ms McLaughlin:** It is past time for the two largest parties to remember for whom they govern. It is not just for themselves or their party members; it is for the people of Northern Ireland. It is for our families, our children and the future. Those two parties lead the Administration, and they must lead. They must deliver. That means that they must deliver for those who are most in need: those on the longest health waiting lists; those who leave school without the skills and qualifications that they need; those who struggle to pay their fuel bills; those who have cold homes; those who cannot get a job because they cannot afford childcare; those who have no job because there are none in the area where they live; and those who are super-intelligent but cannot go to university because there are no local places for them, and they cannot afford to move away to study. Those are the people for whom we need to deliver. They are the people whom the joint leadership of Sinn Féin and the DUP has failed.

May I remind the Finance Minister where the people who have been failed are? They live in Derry, east Belfast and west Belfast. The Finance Minister, Economy Minister and joint First Ministers need to remember the people for whom they are supposed to deliver: our families and our people living here in Northern Ireland. This Budget does not cut it.

**Mr Nesbitt:** It is nice to see a bit of passion being injected into a Budget debate. I am sorry to say that I missed the Minister's opening remarks. I imagine that I would agree with some of the trends mentioned and the high-level remarks made. I agree, for example, that we need multi-year Budgets, which many Members mentioned during the debate. It is high time that we removed the toxic uncertainty that accompanies 12-month Budgets and the negative impact that they have on the ability to deliver services.

I am sure that the Minister agrees with me on the need to better coordinate the Budget with the Programme for Government, which was another theme of the debate. Going forward, there may be a third issue to be locked in: a

Northern Ireland-specific bill of rights. Of course, that is a debate for another day.

## 12.30 pm

The other big issue that the Minister and I agree on is the need to bring forward a prosperity agenda for the citizens of this country. I am most obliged to my party leader, Doug Beattie, who, today, has asked me to become the party spokesman on the economy, which is a role that I fulfilled when I first joined the Assembly 10 years ago. My theme will be a prosperity agenda, with more people getting out of bed with a sense of purpose, with a worthwhile job to be done and with the assurance that people like the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy have their backs.

I think that we can all agree that, if people are getting to a Friday with more money in their back pockets, with a good sense of their own mental health and well-being and with a feeling that they have an equal shot at success as the next person, they can transform our economy, and our economy can transform them and their lives. Thank you for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker. That was a party political broadcast on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

As this point, I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board because I want to talk about what the Budget says about the policing budget. Quite disturbingly, it admits that the funding requirements far outweigh the Department of Justice budget allocation and, therefore, the extent to which the priorities of the Department of Justice can be met.

Specifically, we have a commitment that we all recognise in New Decade, New Approach to increase the headcount of the Police Service of Northern Ireland from 7,000 to 7,500. You will also note that NDNA puts no timescale on that transformation. In this budgetary year, the plan is to get from 7,000 to 7,100. That will be funded not through baseline but through Barnett consequential. It costs £9.8 million just to maintain the status quo of the 7,000 figure, because of the churn of retirements, injury on duty and all the rest.

It will cost £2.5 million in recruitment to get the extra 100 officers, and the annual cost will be £5 million. If you add the churn of £9.8 million to the annual £5 million, you have £14.8 million, which we do not have. It is not baselined, and it is not in next year's budget or in the budget the year after that or the year after that. If it costs £5 million for 100 new officers, in order to get to 7,500, we are missing £34.8 million. We are nearly £35 million shy.

It is not just in recruitment that we have that issue. The paramilitary crime task force is currently £5.8 million short of target. Nobody is saying that that money will not be found through the likes of June monitoring, but, again, it is not baselined. Is that acceptable for such an important work stream to tackle terrorism and paramilitary criminality? We have seen that recently in the north-west, and part of the plan for the paramilitary crime task force is to open a new unit in the north-west, yet the funding is not there in the baseline. The need for the task force will not go away this financial year; it will be with us for some years to come. We have to start to address those issues.

The point is made in this Budget that a lot of the services from the Department of Justice, such as policing, prisons and the rest, are demand-led, but we can look at certain

areas in which to make savings and recalibrate the way in which we spend the budget. We have a segregated prison regime for paramilitary prisoners. Why do we do that? We call them criminals when they are outside prison, and then we allow them to be paramilitary leaders when they are in prison. It comes not only at a financial cost but at a cost to society's perception.

There is also legal aid. Compared with any other region of the United Kingdom, our spend on legal aid is disproportionate. We therefore have huge questions to answer about the Department of Justice's budget for the Police Service of Northern Ireland and what we ask that police service to deliver.

Reference has been made to the legacy agreements from the Stormont House Agreement. I put on record once again, because some people fail to grasp this, that not every party in the House signed up to those legacy proposals. The Ulster Unionist Party did not. Let us remember that it appears that the United Kingdom Government have also —

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

**Mr Nesbitt:** — changed their mind about the Stormont House Agreement legacy proposals, but, again, that is probably a debate for another day.

**Mrs Cameron:** I will focus my remarks on our Health Department budget. If there was ever a year in which we have seen just how important funding for our health service is, the past 12 months have been it. Unprecedented demand has been met with unprecedented levels of financial support. It has been a time when the benefits of being part of the United Kingdom have been so clear. Although those who foolishly wish to end that Union may not acknowledge it, they cannot argue otherwise.

As we now emerge from the pandemic, thanks to the sacrifices of our people, the heroic actions of our healthcare workers and the wonders of science, we must look at the future of our health and social care provision. The current model in Northern Ireland is unsustainable. If we want the best health service for our people, yes, we need funding, but we also need reform. What we have talked about in this place year after year must now be progressed: no excuses. It is hard to ignore the fact that health and social care accounts for half of day-to-day spending this year, at just under £6.5 billion. What more evidence do we need to underline the need for reform and transformation? We all know from constituents who contact us in despair just how bad things are with waiting lists. Given estimates that it will take in the region of £750 million to £1 billion to tackle the elective waiting lists alone, it is clear that the funding impetus for the long-term change that is needed is simply not there at present. That cannot be an excuse to stop the smaller steps that we can take, however. Key to pursuing that agenda are multi-year Budgets. Making that transition is in the interests of more strategic spending decisions and stands to encourage greater scrutiny of expenditure. It is important that no stone be left unturned in ensuring that the current spending review ushers in a three-year Budget.

We all know the limitations of in-year monitoring rounds and one-year Budgets and the impact that they have on planning. Stopgaps and temporary fixes go only so far. The culture needs to change. That is particularly important

for health transformation and the implementation of commitments contained in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I fully agree with those who responded to the consultation by expressing concern around funding for social care. That issue needs greater funding levels if the needs of our constituents are to be met. The lack of certainty on funding yet again hinders our drive to reform and to do what we all know needs to be done.

Finally, I will raise an issue as the chair of the all-party group on autism. Last week, it was revealed that almost one in 20 schoolchildren in Northern Ireland has an autism diagnosis, yet the budgets that are allocated for addressing the needs of our autism community in school and outside of it are a drop in the ocean. We all join rallies and share posts on autism week, but, when it comes to funding sensory facilities or building stadiums, we pour money into stadiums. When it comes to funding speech and language therapy or minority languages, we pour millions into the latter. Where is the perspective? When are we going to stop insulting those with autism and their families and decide what really matters in this country? The term "Tory austerity" will be parroted by many across the House today, but we cannot complain about austerity when we continue to prioritise vanity projects for votes. That is for all of us to consider. On all sides of the House, let us get real. Let us spend wisely what money we do have. We are all familiar with the phrase, "every pound is a prisoner", and that should be our approach to the use of our public money.

**Mr Gildernew:** I rise to provide the House with details of the Health Committee's scrutiny of the 2021-22 budget.

First, I acknowledge the enormous pressure under which the health and social care system is working. I have said many times that the system has been stretched beyond breaking point. We are grateful to all our health and social care workers, who have sacrificed so much over the past year. It is true that our health and social care staff have been, and are, the greatest asset that we have. We need to do everything that we can to support them in their roles as we move out of fighting COVID-19 and into recovery, and addressing the very lengthy waiting lists and increasing health inequality gaps that we see right across the North.

The Committee was briefed by officials on the 2021-22 budget on 29 April. At that briefing, the Health Committee was advised that, as things stand, the Department anticipates additional funding of £495 million compared with its opening baseline last year. While that additional amount is welcome, the Department did outline that, with the lack of recurrent funding, this is, essentially, a standstill budget that will make it difficult for the Department to make any inroads into the waiting lists that the Minister has called "dire" and "appalling". The Department's director of finance outlined that she is even more concerned about the 2022-23 position as the temporary COVID funds are, essentially, masking the scale of the underlying financial pressures within the system.

The Department outlined that it would be very difficult to achieve the effective delivery of strategies, such as those for elective care, cancer, emergency care and mental health, without recurrent funding and reliance on in-year monitoring. That is deeply worrying and should strike us all with fear as those are strategies that, if not resourced and implemented effectively, will result in poorer health outcomes for patients. I think that we all agree on the



need for a health and social care system that is resourced in a way that produces better health outcomes for all our constituents.

The Committee raised a number of concerns with officials in relation to the budget. Everyone is agreed that transformation is essential to deal with rising costs. That is a priority agreed across the Executive and reiterated in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The 2021-22 Budget provides £49 million for NDNA transformation. That is 0.75% of the overall health budget. While allocations for additional nursing staff and mental health are indeed welcome, it just does not go far enough.

Over the past number of months, we have heard significant evidence of the very real benefits of multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) in primary healthcare. GPs have told us how beneficial they are, and we see the reality of that where they exist. However, in this Budget, there is an allocation of £22 million for MDTs. That is not to allow the expansion of a very successful transformation programme but merely to continue to service the MDTs that exist. It was disappointing to hear that the funding set aside for transformation projects is largely to fund programmes that had previously been implemented, and that there is little scope to expand or introduce new transformation projects within the current budget settlement.

The Committee has significant concerns in relation to the length of waiting lists, which have been referenced by nearly every Member who has spoken. The COVID-19 pandemic has, no doubt, exacerbated waiting lists and left patients in very difficult circumstances, resulting in them needing more complex treatment by the time that they get around to their appointments. The Minister recently outlined that it would take £1 billion over 10 years to address the waiting lists. I think that we all agree that this needs to be a priority over the coming financial years. There is a clear need for recurrent funding in the coming years to make inroads into those waiting lists and, ultimately, see better health outcomes for patients. That needs to be taken on board by the British Treasury.

The Committee considered the issue of health inequalities. We raised concerns with officials and the Minister about what are increasing health inequality gaps, especially in relation to mental health and substance use. We continue to see large inequalities in health outcomes for large parts of the population. We need to see more work from the Department and the Executive in tackling health. While we appreciate the fact that many other factors result in health inequalities, such as housing and education, there is simply no doubt that health is a key component and that we need to see active planning rather than a restatement of the problems. We must ensure that our population all have equal access to services and equality of outcomes.

#### 12.45 pm

Although in-year allocations are, no doubt, hugely welcome in a very difficult system, Members will appreciate that they are not conducive to long-term planning, and the Committee underlines the need for a multi-year budget that provides the recurrent funding and certainty that we need to see.

In concluding my remarks as the Health Committee Chair, I say that there is concerning evidence of increasing financial strain in the health and social care system and

little opportunity to make the type of progress that is needed to address those strains due to COVID-19 as well financial pressures. The Committee will continue to monitor the situation and seek to engage constructively as that progresses.

I will now make some remarks as Sinn Féin's health spokesperson. The health and social care sector is being challenged in ways that we have rarely seen. The state of our healthcare system has undoubtedly been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, but our problems started long before that. The Tory Government and their austere economic policies have failed, and nowhere is that failure clearer than in the emergency departments and the GP waiting rooms across the North that every one of us is dealing with. It is undeniable that austerity causes suffering. It causes workforce shortages, bed shortages and equipment shortages, and, most importantly, it denies our constituents the right to enjoy good health standards.

The waiting lists that we are talking about today are not a new story. The Royal College of Surgeons advised today that, as of December 2020, over 323,000 people were waiting to see a consultant and 105,000 people were waiting for admission for surgery. That equates to one in four of our constituents waiting for the healthcare that they need, with some of them experiencing unbearable pain and stress. That simply cannot continue. We cannot address waiting lists without addressing chronic staffing shortages, and we need to see multi-year budgeting for that to take effect.

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

**Mr Gildernew:** Our health and social care system is in crisis. There is a huge challenge in the coming years to deliver the health services and care that our constituents need, deserve and are entitled to.

**Ms Armstrong:** I thank the Finance Minister — you will not hear that too often today, Minister — for presenting his Budget. Like others, I will be voting for the Budget. What other option do we have? Any delay in getting this one-year Budget confirmed will put pressure on our civil servants and the many organisations and businesses that await contracts and grants. I hope that, as highlighted by others, this is the last time that we receive a one-year Budget from the Minister of Finance. The Minister and all of us in the House recognise that, without a multi-year Budget process, the efficiency savings made through the planned and strategic delivery of services cannot be realised.

Before joining the House in 2016, I worked in the community and voluntary sector, where late letters of offer, the constant threat of redundancy and mad March moneys made planning very difficult. That all added a dimension of stress that was unnecessary, and it is time that we plan for multi-year Budgets to give those who deliver our services some reprieve and some confidence that their jobs will be secure.

As the Alliance Party spokesperson for communities and Deputy Chair of the Communities Committee, I share the concern that is felt by all the members of the Committee for Communities, as expressed by the Chair of the Committee earlier in the debate. The bid made by the Department was £132.589 million but the award allocated was £66.825 million; a shortfall of almost £66 million.

That shortfall will have a serious negative impact on the community, which is trying to come out of COVID.

Minister, this is a cold Budget. It is a very difficult Budget; one that I am sure that you are not happy to have to bring to the House. The shortfall means that there is zero support for councils to deliver COVID-recovery programmes; social supermarkets received zero; arts, cultural and heritage recovery also received zero; the charities and social enterprise recovery fund received nothing; new welfare mitigations to close the loopholes in the bedroom tax and the two-child limit were allocated nothing; and the advice sector, which provides much-needed welfare reform advice, was allocated zero.

I am aware that the Department for Communities submitted a bid to the Department of Finance to update COVID funding requirements. The updated bid for £68,645,000 aims to address some of the areas that were not allocated any expenditure in the 2021-22 Budget. It is disappointing to all of us that Departments have to wait for in-year resource bids to be able to fund necessary services which we all agreed through Bengoa and New Decade, New Approach for transformation to deliver more efficient services.

I also found it very difficult to read that the Communities Department's Budget presentation confirmed how it had to focus on how workloads are aligned to the Department's strategic objectives. Why should I find that difficult? I find it difficult because we have a draft Programme for Government in which all Departments should be working together to deliver cross-cutting outcomes. However, where are the shared budget areas in this Budget? If we are to achieve societal objectives as outlined in the draft Programme for Government or in any future Programme for Government, we need to see a more strategic Budget that reflects both departmental priorities and how outcomes will be delivered.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Member for giving way. That is a very important point. If you have a Programme for Government that is not budgeted, you do not have a good Programme for Government. If you have a Budget that is not aligned to the Programme for Government, you do not have strategic thought or vision in the Budget. It is a massive issue, and I agree with the Member.

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

**Ms Armstrong:** Hopefully, I will not need it, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member very much.

Our intention with the Programme for Government was that strategy would guide the Budget rather than money guide what we can do. As my colleague Andrew Muir said earlier, I welcome the role that the Fiscal Council will have in assisting the Minister of Finance and his Department. I say to the Minister: is it time for a new way of thinking on our Budget? Is it time to start the work today on a new way to develop and deliver our Budget? How can we improve Committee scrutiny? How can we include the public? How can the Budget be presented in order to demonstrate how the Programme for Government outcomes will be achieved?

Perhaps, in his response, the Minister will provide his thoughts on the way forward and on how, for the rest of this year, he and his team will develop a Budget-setting

process that will enable the House to have a Budget presented in advance of a financial year. Minister, Westminster will always provide figures late. I know that that breaks our hearts and yours. We know that not all that we ask for will be provided. It is time that we proactively move to let our strategic outcomes guide the Budget, and I will support you when you are trying to do that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1:00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2:00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be questions to the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. This debate will resume after Question Time, when the next Member to be called will be Robin Newton.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.53 pm.*

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

#### Climate Change

1. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in light of the support for the Climate Change Bill [NIA 19/17-22], which is now at Committee Stage, whether he intends to bring forward an alternative climate change Bill. (AQO 2104/17-22)

5. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the risks of carbon leakage with a carbon net zero target by 2045. (AQO 2108/17-22)

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 5 together. I want to ensure that Northern Ireland plays its part in minimising greenhouse gas emissions and tackling climate change head-on. I am committed to Northern Ireland having its own climate change legislation to achieve that. We do not need just any Bill; we need the right, evidenced-based climate change Bill that sets out an achievable pathway for Northern Ireland to contribute to the wider UK and global efforts for greenhouse gas emission reductions. Therefore, I intend to bring a climate change Bill that is an alternative to the private Member's Bill, one that is strongly evidence-based and better for Northern Ireland and that will be a high-quality piece of legislation. I have been seeking to get the proposals for that on the agenda of an Executive meeting since 24 March 2021, and it has yet to happen. My officials are working with the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) and are very well advanced on the drafting of a climate change Bill based on my proposals. I intend to circulate my draft Bill and accompanying explanatory and financial memorandum to Executive colleagues. Once agreement to proceed is secured, I intend and am prepared to quickly move to introduce the right climate change Bill for Northern Ireland.

It is important that carbon leakage is taken into account when setting emission reduction targets so that we do not inadvertently displace emissions to other jurisdictions. In some situations, such leakage could result in higher levels of overall emissions due to practices in other jurisdictions potentially not being as sustainable as those in Northern Ireland. In that context, the agri-food sector, for which my Department has sectoral responsibility, aiming for a net zero carbon target by 2045 presents an increased risk of carbon leakage. The Climate Change Committee (CCC), in recommending an emissions reduction target of at least 82% for Northern Ireland by 2050, took account of the importance of the Northern Ireland agri-food sector and the fact that around 50% of NI produce is exported to other parts of the United Kingdom.

Whilst targets, such as having net zero carbon by 2045, may stimulate some sectors, carbon leakage is extremely

pertinent for the agri-food sector. In its analysis for Northern Ireland, the CCC felt that, based on current knowledge, meeting net zero carbon by 2050 would require such a significant reduction in livestock production, particularly in the beef and dairy sectors, that it did not present a viable option.

**Mr Speaker:** You went well over your two minutes, Minister, if I may remind you.

**Mr Poots:** Apologies.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I think that the answer was yes. Did the Minister have sight of the current Climate Change Bill that is going through the Assembly before it was made public, or did he have any input into it?

**Mr Poots:** No. I did not have input into the private Member's Bill. It was not consulted upon with the public in the first instance. There are serious flaws in the private Member's Bill. Leaving aside the issues that I outlined about not taking the independent expert advice and simply latching on to what is happening in other jurisdictions, where there is no direct interchange, leads to the very significant flaws in the private Member's Bill.

I wish there to be climate change legislation. I wish that legislation to make a real and tangible difference. The problem is if we simply introduce legislation that translates to the beef or dairy that is produced in Northern Ireland being produced in South America, for example, we will be cutting down trees in order to produce that beef and will do more harm to the environment. Jumping up and down and pretending that you are doing something for the environment whenever what you are actually doing is entirely counterproductive is not a wise way forward, in my opinion.

**Mr Irwin:** Will the Minister outline what other risks he envisages as a result of being net zero by 2045?

**Mr Poots:** First, there is the risk of job losses in the agri-food sector, which employs well over 100,000 people. If there is a 50% reduction in beef and dairy, which are the two largest parts of the sector, there will be job losses. For example, County Tyrone is a hub for agri-food and has many large factories. Such a reduction would lead to job losses and have an impact on the regional balance of our economy, with a disproportionate impact on rural communities, particularly in the west of Northern Ireland.

Going beyond the natural rate of stock turnover would also lead to the premature scrappage of assets. High-quality dairy cows and beef cows, for example, may have to be slaughtered at a much earlier age, and that is not a benefit to the environment.

We are looking at a potential increase in prices due to a loss of control in production and the importation of so many goods. There is the potential for lower welfare standards and the quality of imported goods being of a lesser standard than what we have at home. There is also the potential for increased transport emissions, depending on the means of transport into the country. For example, it is not only about the shipping of meat from South America to here but the fact that it may have been hauled for thousands of miles to get to the port. There is potential for a loss of support from the very sectors and those who rely on them that we need to achieve emission reductions. We could fail to meet legislative carbon budget targets at an early stage, which would result in a loss of momentum and

detract from any positive progress that is made. Finally, there is the sheer cost of achieving net zero by 2045 as opposed to an 82% reduction by 2050, with the ability to increase that if the science allows us to do so.

**Mr McGuigan:** Notwithstanding the fact that climate legislation was a commitment in ‘New Decade, New Approach’ (NDNA), my colleague and Chair of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, Declan McAleer, tabled a motion calling on you to introduce a climate Bill almost a year ago. The private Member’s Bill that is in motion and is supported by the Assembly is a response to your failure to act. Given the important issue at stake and the extremely tight time frame, does the Minister agree that his time would be better spent engaging with the existing Bill, rather than attempting to belatedly bring forward his own?

**Mr Poots:** That demonstrates the desperation of those who are trying to undermine me and have been sitting on my Bill from 24 March. My paper has been with the Executive since 24 March. I will provide the Executive with a full copy of the Bill so that they have absolutely no excuse for not moving it forward. The legislation is there, and it will go before the Executive. That legislation has been consulted on, and work has been done on the costs. We can produce a Disney World Bill from anywhere, put it out there and say, “This is what’s good for Northern Ireland”, but it will not be Disney World when the farmers in West Tyrone are driven off the hills because people do not want their beef and they cannot produce their beef because of a Climate Change Bill that Sinn Féin has supported.

I hope that you will be able to go back to North Antrim and tell the farmers there that they are no longer needed because Sinn Féin wants to back a Climate Change Bill that has not gone through the regular processes of consultation, has not been costed and has not taken the independent advice that is available. Instead of that, you should back and support me in bringing forward my legislation. I said that I could not bring forward legislation in three months because I had to go through a consultation process, and that was accurate. The other Bill was rushed. That leads to rushed legislation, and rushed legislation, as always, gets the label of “bad legislation”.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for confirming that he intends to introduce said Bill. Will there be specific emissions targets for the agriculture sector in the Minister’s Bill? If so, what support is envisaged for that sector to assist it in meeting those targets?

**Mr Poots:** The Bill that we introduce will have targets and will identify where those targets can be achieved. Northern Ireland has made substantial progress on transport and energy and can make substantial progress on agri-food. Farmers and the agri-food sector have bought in to doing this. Cranswick pork factory, for example, is operating a net zero plan.

People are totally committed to achieving this. Why are we saying to those people, “Yes, you are committed to helping, but we are not interested in working with you to ensure that you have an industry in the future”? We need to ensure that we bring people with us in a way that sustains jobs, sustains the economy and puts food on people’s tables. We all say that we might not have a planet in a number of years, but we will not have a life if we do

not have food on our tables. Food production is one of the most important tasks anywhere in the world, and I for one am not prepared to take the quality food production in Northern Ireland and offset that in some other part of the world that has lower animal welfare standards, lower workers’ standards, lower carbon standards for us to say, “What good boys are we”, because we are not producing carbon but are using material where carbon has been produced at an even higher level than it would have been had we used material produced in Northern Ireland.

**Dr Aiken:** Minister, you and the Economy Minister have asked Sir Peter Kendall to do a review of agribusiness in Northern Ireland. Sir Peter Kendall was clear that this is not about a zero-sum option for agriculture but about being smarter. Will the Minister and whoever will be the new Economy Minister commit to taking the recommendations and implementing them in full?

**Mr Poots:** We did not take on Peter Kendall to do work and then for us not to give due regard to his recommendations. He comes with an excellent track record, and I expect that his report will be of a high standard. It would, therefore, be foolish of us, having commissioned such a report, not to pay attention to what is in it.

**Mr Catney:** Minister, on the basis of your answer to my Lagan Valley colleague Trevor Lunn, I am not sure whether you are still committed, as stated in the climate Bill that you intend to introduce, to having zero emissions by 2050. I heard you mention a figure of 82.5%, but I hope that you are still committed to making that target in your climate Bill.

**Mr Poots:** I am absolutely committed to this country — the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland — reaching net zero by 2050. I am absolutely committed to Northern Ireland making its contribution, as recommended by independent experts on climate change.

**Mr Allister:** Given the governmental system in which the Minister operates, will he clarify whether he is at liberty to bring a Bill to the House without the assent of the Executive? If he is not, does that mean that his best intentions, which are far preferable to what we have before us, can be stymied by other political parties, most particularly Sinn Féin, simply declining to give assent?

**Mr Poots:** There is a lot of truth in what the Member says. The problem for Sinn Féin, however, is that the issue probably impacts on the farming community that it represents more than on any other, because it is more likely to impact on hill farms and marginal land. The land that will have the lowest carbon footprint will be the lowlands. Sinn Féin talks a lot about hill farmers and people who operate on farms that are marginal because of the quality of the land, but Sinn Féin does not seem to mind turning those farmers over on this issue. Sinn Féin can reflect on that when it blocks my Bill and supports something that will do demonstrable harm to the people whom that party purports to represent.

## Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation

2. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme. (AQO 2105/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** I have secured an initial allocation of £5.5 million — £2.5 million resource and £3 million capital —

for the 2021-22 tackling rural poverty and social isolation programme, which will support a range of interventions that are consistent with the programme's objectives and intended outcomes of the TRPSI framework. I recently approved the 2021-22 TRPSI programme action plan, which builds on the success of working collaboratively with other Departments, statutory agencies and the community and voluntary sector.

The plan reflects the important role that the TRPSI programme budget will play in sustaining existing initiatives and promoting the development of new approaches.

### 2.15 pm

The resource funding will support the rural community development support service (RCDSS), the charity Rural Support, the assisted rural travel scheme (ARTS), the farm families health checks programme, the social farming support service, social prescribing and employability schemes. The TRPSI programme will also fund capital projects that enhance and develop rural recreational facilities such as forest parks and community trails. The rural micro capital grant scheme will support community and voluntary sector projects to address localised poverty and isolation issues, while the rural business development grant scheme will support the sustainability of rural businesses. Other collaborative projects focusing on the regeneration of villages, the use of rural schools as community facilities and increased access to buildings for persons with disabilities will continue this year.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he agrees with me that, in the context of the overall budget, the TRPSI programme represents a modest amount but is an example of how a modest amount can go a long way. Does the Minister agree that a well-funded TRPSI programme will be essential to enable rural community organisations and rural communities at large to emerge from the COVID pandemic?

**Mr Poots:** That is why I have secured the provision that we have. That is a demonstration of our commitment to the rural community, which goes beyond the agriculture sector, and of our ability to assist rural communities in a tangible way in conjunction with other key bodies. For example, the farm families health checks will be carried out in conjunction with trusts. Much of the work that we will do will be done in conjunction with local government. We can achieve a considerable amount by leveraging additional money through the TRPSI funding, which can significantly boost rural communities to an even greater extent.

**Mr McNulty:** What measures does the Department use to assess rural poverty, social isolation and loneliness? How successful do the measures show his programme to have been?

**Mr Poots:** All the measures that we have identified have been significantly addressed as a result of the programme. We have been targeting communities in which isolation is a significant problem. A lot of that funding was used during the COVID period, when, for example, we entered into agreement with the Department for Infrastructure on the rural transport scheme to ensure that people who were isolated and vulnerable because of COVID and who had previously used that transport to travel into town continued to get food and medicines and had that transport bring produce to them.

There has been a series of schemes that involve the better utilisation of public buildings to ensure that they can be used for other purposes; for example, schools are used for purposes other than education. We have been able to support education providers with iPads and digital technology, particularly on the back of COVID, to ensure that children in rural communities have the opportunity to continue their education even when they could not travel to school as a consequence of COVID.

### Applications to Area-based Schemes

3. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the review of decisions for area-based schemes applications. (AQO 2106/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** Last November, I stated my belief that the decision of the independent panel in review-of-decision cases should be final. My officials are working to put in place the necessary legislation, and a consultation document will be published shortly. The tenure of the current panel ends in January 2022, and the consultation document will ask for views on the make-up of a future panel, given its decision-making role.

I have decided that, until the legislation is in place, I will make the final decision in all cases coming from the independent panel. As of May 2021, there are 108 ongoing applications for a case officer review of decision. There are a further 51 ongoing applications for an independent panel assessment. Of those, 36 have a panel pending, while officials are preparing submissions for my final decision for 15 businesses, following the independent panel assessment.

**Mr Lynch:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. I represent a rural constituency, and this issue can impact on farmers' mental health. Will the Minister and his Department, with other agencies, mitigate the impact on farmers?

**Mr Poots:** Unlike previous Ministers, who overturned many of the panel appeals, I have not. I accept the decisions of the independent panel. I do not see the point in having an independent panel to deal with appeals if a Minister, such as Ministers O'Neill and Gildernew, strike out the decision of the independent panel and take the advice of the civil servants who rejected the farmer's case in the first instance. The Member can be grateful that he now has a DUP Minister who reflects the views of the panel, as opposed to Sinn Féin Ministers, who often rejected those views.

**Mrs Barton:** Minister, you have just said that you will uphold decisions made by the independent panel. Will that policy be backdated to 2016, 2015 etc?

**Mr Poots:** I had not planned to backdate it. I have a responsibility for the decisions that I make; I do not have responsibility for the decisions that previous Ministers made.

### Fish Kill: Aghlisk River

4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the investigation into the fish kill in the Aghlisk river on 2 May 2021. (AQO 2107/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** Following extensive investigations by the Loughs Agency, it is confident that the source of the pollution has been identified and stopped. Analytical results from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) laboratories are now awaited. That will determine the next steps for the Loughs Agency. As with all investigations of this nature, details remain sub judice until their formal conclusion. That being the case, I am unable to comment further.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Given the significance of the fish kill in this incident and too many other incidents of pollution of riverways, lakes or loughs, does the Minister believe that the protections and enforcement in place are sufficient to protect our natural habitats?

**Mr Poots:** These are tricky issues. Some of the pollution incidents come from our Water Service. That has improved fairly dramatically. We also have some industry pollution incidents. Invariably, it proves very difficult to identify the sources of those. That has been particularly problematic in rivers like the Sixmilewater, where there has been a regular number of incidents but an inability to identify the sources. If you follow the pollution, it takes you to a large industrial estate where it is hard to identify the source. There has been a substantial improvement in incidents related to agriculture, but there is more to do. We continue to educate in the first instance and enforce in the second. I much prefer the education route to enforcement. Enforcement is for when failure has happened, and we want to avoid failure.

**Mr McNulty:** When was the last time that a prosecution was brought by NIEA or the Loughs Agency following a fish kill?

**Mr Poots:** I do not have the detail of when the last time was, but many cases are brought. It is usual for that to happen. They are reported regularly, so people know the costs that can be involved. Those costs can be hefty, because there is full cost recovery for the incident. People are usually talking not about hundreds of pounds but about many thousands and, sometimes, five-figure sums.

**Mr Beggs:** The Minister has referred to the fact that there can be a wide range of sources of pollution, including the Water Service. Given that our sewerage system is already at capacity in many areas, will the Minister advise whether he has been involved in any discussions at Executive level to solve the impasse with the Water Service so that pollution does not continue to be released, affecting the quality of our rivers?

**Mr Poots:** I have directly met the Infrastructure Minister on that issue. We need to be very careful that the area plans produced by local authorities take full cognisance of Northern Ireland Water's ability to deal with the sewage arising from new developments. I am not sure that that is the case. That area needs to be addressed. At the Executive, I have supported additional funding for Northern Ireland Water, because more investment in the capital infrastructure is critical. It is not the most popular thing to invest in. Sewerage and water pipes are beneath the ground. It is not a new school or hospital. People do not see it, but there is a significant benefit from that investment, and it is important that the Northern Ireland Executive continue to invest in having good-quality sewerage and water infrastructure to help to ensure that our environment is maintained at a high level.

## Biodiversity

6. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action he is taking to reverse the damage to our biodiversity as a result of human activity. (AQO 2109/17-22)

9. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps he is taking to encourage biodiversity and habitat creation in urban settings, including in private gardens. (AQO 2112/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to group questions 6 and 9 together.

My Department has commenced preparations for a new Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy that will take account of the international post-2020 targets for biodiversity. Those targets will be discussed at the forthcoming international meeting known as COP15, the fifteen meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The COP15 meeting is scheduled for 11 to 24 October 2021 in Kunming, China.

A major feature of COP15 will be the agreement to protect 30% of the planet by 2030, often referred to as the "30 by 30" target. I endorse the 30 by 30 target, and my Department is considering how best to achieve that. Protecting and restoring biodiversity in Northern Ireland is a long-term commitment. The actions that we take now will enable Northern Ireland to meet the overarching global 2050 vision of living in harmony with nature.

I recognise the importance of encouraging biodiversity in the urban environment. Priority habitats such as rivers, ponds and open mosaic habitats on previously developed land underline the importance of habitats in urban areas and the need to promote those special places for nature. My Department is involved in a number of initiatives to promote urban biodiversity, including the promotion of the all-Ireland pollinator plan in working with local communities to create and protect habitats for pollinators, such as by having urban pollinator-friendly planting and sustainable parks management. Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and Eco-Schools work to inform, support and promote biodiversity and habitat creation and receive funding from the Department to carry out that work.

DAERA works with councils to advise on the development of biodiversity strategies, green infrastructure plans, the designation of local nature reserves, conservation actions to support biodiversity and habitat creation and conservation in urban areas. The Department also gives advice to the public on wildlife-friendly gardening —

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister's two minutes is up.

**Mr Poots:** — recognising the importance of urban gardens in providing a refuge for biodiversity.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. A number of studies, including the 'State of Nature' report, the National Biodiversity Forum report and the 'Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland' report, have shown very worrying trends in our biodiversity. The 'State of Nature' report showed that 11% of species assessed were under threat of extinction on the island of Ireland. Will the Minister agree that we are experiencing a biodiversity crisis?

**Mr Poots:** I absolutely recognise that we need to do more biodiversity work, and that is one of the reasons why I have commissioned a peatlands strategy, for example. That strategy is close to completion and will be made public during this session of the Assembly. The peatlands strategy is an important piece of work for a very large part of our biodiversity — not the only part, but a large part. We also need to encourage pollination in urban and agricultural settings to ensure that we can continue to promote wildlife and biodiversity right across our country.

**Mr Speaker:** There is time for a very brief question in response.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the Minister for his very detailed answer. Obviously, there is a great renewed interest in biodiversity, especially given the last year. Can the Minister tell us a bit more about the actions that he is taking to increase overall biodiversity?

**Mr Poots:** My Department has commenced preparations for a new Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy. The strategy will implement the international post-2020 targets for biodiversity that will be agreed when the COP15 meets later this year.

Protecting and restoring biodiversity in Northern Ireland is a long-term commitment. The actions that we take now will enable Northern Ireland to meet the overarching global 2050 vision of living in harmony with nature. That is critically important.

## 2.30 pm

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

### Mullaghglass Landfill Site

T1. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether, following his written response last week to her colleague Paul Maskey in which the Minister shared her party's serious concern about the foul and offensive odour coming from the Mullaghglass landfill site, which residents have been living with for years, he can commit to looking into the possibility of closing the site and launching an independent investigation. (AQT 1351/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** Yes, I have plans to visit the site in the near future. I recognise that there have been a substantial number of complaints from the residents in that area. I believe that it is not a tolerable situation, so I want to ensure that either we get on top of the odour problem or we look at the suspension of activities at the site.

**Ms Flynn:** I thank the Minister for his response, and I am glad to hear that he is going out on a site visit. In his letter, he mentioned that the health implications were of the utmost concern to him. Although the Public Health Agency (PHA) has advised that unpleasant smells are not known to be harmful to health, the PHA has also said that persistent odours can cause headaches and nausea and that extreme smells and unpleasant odours can lead to mental health issues. All of those effects have been reported from local residents. What is the Minister's opinion on the assertion that there are health implications for residents? Will the Minister give a firm assurance that he will try to get this sorted?

**Mr Poots:** I cannot make a statement on the health implications, because it is the Public Health Agency that gives the advice and the Health Minister who makes those statements. I hear what people are saying, and we will pass that information on to the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency for their further investigation, but my Department has to take the advice from the experts in public health.

### Beef: Protected Geographical Indication Status

T2. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, who will be aware that the European Commission has called for the North to be included in the Irish grass-fed beef protected geographical indication (PGI) application, whether he joins him in welcoming that development. (AQT 1352/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** Yes.

**Mr Gildernew:** The Minister will be aware of the welcomed additional value that such an inclusion would have in the value of our beef output — up to 20%, some evidence indicates — and of the fact that the carbon footprint of our grass-fed cattle is much lower than the global average. Does the Minister agree that an all-Ireland PGI status would play a key role in recognising the fact that we have the world's most climate-friendly beef here on the island of Ireland?

**Mr Poots:** I am delighted to hear the Member making the argument that I was making earlier in Question Time — that it would be ludicrous to shift beef production from Northern Ireland to less carbon-friendly places in the world and that, therefore, the legislation before us is unwise. With regard to the issue that he raises, yes, we should be looking to identify every marketing opportunity that exists, and I therefore support the PGI Irish grass-fed status. There is potential for a British grass-fed status, which we may also be able to apply to. I do not care who gives us the highest price for our beef; I will be happy to take the highest price for beef from anywhere in the world if I can get it for my farmers.

### North/South Ministerial Meetings

T3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, who is due shortly to take up an important role in which he wishes him all the best, whether, given the importance of North/South working and having emphasised the importance of the agri-food sector, which is a key element of it, he can confirm that he will not obstruct any further North/South meetings. (AQT 1353/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** I remain committed to all my duties as a Minister in this devolved Assembly.

**Mr McGlone:** I am glad to hear that. Exports from the North to the Republic in 2017 amounted to £2.17 billion. Indeed, 600 million litres of milk traversed the border in 2015 for processing in creameries and other places. Does the Minister therefore accept that trade, business development and food safety promotion, which he mentioned could be at risk due to a race to the bottom in other trade deals, will be very important?

**Mr Poots:** I consider our North/South relationships to be very important. That is why, as a Minister, I very quickly made the decision to open the radiotherapy centre in Altnagelvin Hospital, which provides cancer care for people on both sides of the border. That is why, when it became obvious that we could not carry on paediatric cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland because we were unable to have a surgical team in place, I came to an agreement to have it in Dublin. I remain totally committed to working on a North/South basis on issues that benefit the people in Northern Ireland who I represent. I will continue to do that, whether it is from within or outside the North/South bodies.

Relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have never been worse, however, because the Republic of Ireland, when it was led by Mr Varadkar and Mr Coveney in particular, sought to create barriers between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, which is our main trading partner. As a consequence, every home is being damaged, and, on the Executive's papers, there are red boxes for health. We are in the red zone in every area of health, including for medical devices and medicines. We were put in that zone as a result of the protocol, which was very heavily driven by the former Taoiseach and Tánaiste. Relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are very bad, and they need to be fixed. In order to fix those relations, however, we need reassurances that we will get somewhere considerably better than where we are currently with the protocol.

### DAERA Port Staff

T4. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given the imposition of the protocol on Northern Ireland as a result of the agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union, which has been legislated for in UK law, to highlight the costs of his staff at the ports (AQT 1354/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** I am happy to do that. We have developed, since June 2020, the costs over the last year. The cost for vets, including managers, is £5,271,696. The cost for the other ancillary staff provided by DAERA is £6,324,902. The cost of the environmental health officers and ancillary staff provided by the councils is £12,848,034. That brings us to a total of £24,444,632.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. That is yet another example of the unacceptable nature of the protocol and the need for it to be replaced and challenged. Those are staggering figures, and we have only just commenced with this process. What steps are you taking to right that wrong, which is outside the control of the Northern Ireland Executive?

**Mr Poots:** One of the wrongs that the European Union demands of us is to pass all those costs on to businesses. Of course, when the grace period ends, those costs will spiral considerably, because we will move to what the Department suggests will be some 15,000 checks per week, which is considerably greater than what we do currently. Those costs will absolutely spiral. Meanwhile, the European Union says that we need to pass those costs on to businesses. Do you know who pays when we pass the costs on to businesses? The consumers. That is why I have repeatedly said in the Assembly that the protocol will hurt every single individual in Northern Ireland, whether

they are consumers who are affected by the costs in shops being driven up, consumers who are told, "We do not supply to Northern Ireland any more, because it is too small a market and there are too many complications", or consumers who need healthcare and the use of medical devices that our health service will not be able to provide because of an ill-thought-out protocol that is doing fundamental damage to every single person in Northern Ireland and that will continue to do fundamental damage to every single person in Northern Ireland if it remains unchecked.

Therefore, I will continue to press the UK Government hard on the issues that are at stake here, and I have the benefit of knowing that the case is unarguable — this protocol is bad for Northern Ireland. The people who previously called for the rigorous implementation of the protocol have gone very quiet about seeking its rigorous implementation. Not too many in the SDLP, Sinn Féin or the Alliance Party now call for rigorous implementation. People are recognising the harm that they have done. We now need those people —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's two minutes are up.

**Mr Poots:** — to stand up and say, "We do not want this protocol either".

### Urban/rural Divide

T5. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, who will be aware of the recent decision of the Rural Women's Network to close for two weeks, citing workload and limited resources as key issues, whether he agrees that the pandemic has amplified the urban/rural divide on matters including access to services, broadband and opportunities to work from home for key workers in industries such as food processing. (AQT 1355/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** Our food processing sector continues to grow, and we are delighted to support it in so many ways. I have just launched a significant investment in the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). The greater part of that investment, some £43 million for the Loughry campus in Cookstown, is in food processing. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that rural communities do not suffer as a consequence of not having the same opportunities. DAERA is contributing to Project Stratum some £15 million of the overall package of £200 million, and that has been delivered as a result of the confidence-and-supply deal done by the Democratic Unionist Party. That will help to ensure that people in rural communities are not disadvantaged, and it will show that we care about them.

**Ms Dolan:** Given the disparity between urban and rural and the impact that that has, does the Minister agree that all Departments must fulfil their rural needs duty to ensure that rural communities are not disadvantaged when accessing government funding?

**Mr Poots:** Yes, and that is one of the reasons why I am opposed to the Climate Change Bill that your party supports. It had not gone through a rural needs assessment before coming to the House. Despite that, your party supports the Bill.



## Animal Cruelty Register

T6. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the discussions that he has had with the Minister of Justice to progress an animal cruelty register. (AQT 1356/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** The Justice Minister and I met earlier this month to discuss that very issue.

**Ms Bunting:** I thank the Minister for his short and sweet answer. What are his plans to strengthen the laws on cruelty and animal welfare? Is there a time frame for the progression of such an animal cruelty register?

**Mr Poots:** I am very keen to see these laws progressed, and I am very keen to get to a situation in which people who have been cruel to animals have their names associated with that cruelty. Then, when councils are looking at applications for dog licences or for people to keep dogs, they can very quickly assess whether individuals are suitable people to keep animals.

We seem to have issues with the Department of Justice and the sharing of information. I believe that, if people have engaged in criminal activities that involve cruelty to animals, there should be no hiding place for them. I hope that the Department of Justice will find a way of working with us — there is, perhaps, a greater willingness than there was — to ensure that, first, we can identify people who engage in animal cruelty and, secondly, ensure that people who engage in it do not have the opportunity to persist in their activities by being allowed to keep animals in the future.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

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

2.45 pm

## Executive Committee Business

### Budget 2021-22

*Debate resumed on amendment to motion:*

*That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2021-22 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 1 April 2021 and the further detailed information laid on 27 April 2021.*  
— [Mr Murphy.]

*Which amendment was:*

*Leave out all after “information” and insert:*

*“provided to Members on 27 April 2021 and laid on 19 May 2021.”* — [Mr Murphy.]

**Mr Newton:** I will just get myself ready. I did not quite expect to have the principal position of being the first Member to speak in this debate this afternoon.

I was thinking about this matter last night when my wife asked me a question. She said, “What is happening tomorrow in the Assembly?”. I said that I would be speaking on the Minister’s Budget Bill, and she said, “Well, I hope that you are speaking on the Micawber theory of economics”. It took me a minute or two to work out what the Micawber theory was, but she reminded me anyway. She said, “It would do the Assembly well to think about the Micawber theory”, and she reminded me that the advice came from ‘David Copperfield’. Mr Micawber’s theory was this:

*“Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen and six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.”*

In short, if you continue to spend more money than you earn, you will find yourself in serious trouble. To put it even more simply: you have to budget. You would think, in the current climate of the world’s economy, that nobody had ever been warned about the dangers of debt. A significant amount of what the Minister has to play with this year comes via debt. It is COVID-19 money that has been borrowed by the Exchequer, and some day it will have to be repaid. It certainly will not be paid by me or a number of others here, but our grandchildren will end up repaying it somehow.

The Minister has presented the Budget and states in his introduction at chapter one:

*“This Budget document sets out the Northern Ireland Executive’s spending plans for the one year period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.”*

It is now 25 May 2021.

The Minister states:

*“the Executive constructed this Budget in a curtailed timeframe, and made difficult choices as the non COVID-19 resources made available are only slightly more than the 2021-22 financial year.”*

If ever there was a need to think about a three-year timescale when planning a Budget, it is encapsulated in what the Minister said in his introduction. In my latter days as a representative for east Belfast on Belfast City Council, I remember arguing — it was generally accepted, certainly by the senior officers in the council — that the council budget needed to be thought about in a minimum of three-year cycles, and perhaps even three-year to five-year cycles for the more strategic aspects of budget planning.

The Minister also rightly makes the point that his funding sources are the block grant, reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing, European Union income, other income that he has not specified and, indeed, specific financial packages. He also highlighted regional rates as a funding source. We all know that the regional rate this coming year and likely next year too is going to be reduced.

In paragraph 3.15, he indicates:

*“Changes to the level of funding for the Executive are automatically determined by changes in funding for comparable spending in Whitehall departments.”*

As other Members mentioned earlier today, we know that Whitehall spending is under critical examination and review. That is likely to have implications for spending potential in Northern Ireland.

I welcome aspects of what the Minister has been able to do within the constraints. I welcome the increase in the Health budget, which is an area that holds a special place in our mind at the moment. The Minister has been able to make £430 million available for the health service from COVID resources. Having got that money, the Assembly needs to think much more about having a strategic spending review. We need to think about reform of our health service. We need to think about the Bengoa report, which is sitting on a shelf gathering dust. We swiftly need to implement many aspects of that document, which, I think, was accepted unanimously by the Assembly a few years ago. It would have been unthinkable if the Minister had not allocated the £430 million to Health to address the situation.

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

**Mr Catney:** I recognise that we are in a unique time owing to the pandemic, and the struggles that the Minister has had to get the Budget agreed by the Executive after the late announcement of the funding envelope by the Treasury in November. However, I have serious concerns that we rely too heavily on excuses instead of driving forward the significant changes that this place needs.

As a general point, although it is largely outside the control of the Department, the time that was allowed for consultation and scrutiny of the Budget was, obviously, far too short. There also seems to have been limited consideration of issues that were brought by those who were consulted. I notice that action is in the summary, but, surely, that requires more than two thirds of a page. There is a clear lack of detail in the document. We have proposals and total allocations for Departments but, with the exception of some headline announcements, very little is said about what new spending will be funded and how existing spending might change.

I am also concerned about the lack of confirmation of funding for specific proposals in the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ document. There was progress on some NDNA commitments during 2020. However, there is no clarity about the current status of many commitments, such as action on health waiting lists, developing a regionally balanced economy and driving the delivery of essential infrastructure. One key area of concern is the lack of confirmation on the £25 million for low-carbon transport. The Minister for Infrastructure has done excellent work with a limited budget. However, significant investment is needed to bring forward low-carbon transport in order to tackle the climate crisis.

Even before NDNA, we lacked confirmation of funding from the confidence-and-supply agreement, including £10 million for mental health, £20 million for severe deprivation and £42.3 million for broadband to help those in digital poverty. Last night, I heard of another one of my constituents in Lagan Valley who took their own life. We must not lose focus on the terrible impact of poor mental health in Northern Ireland. That funding must be secured.

There has been a missed opportunity to set a key strategic focus throughout the Budget to increase Northern Ireland’s rate of business start-ups, which will be crucial to rebuilding after the economic devastation of COVID-19 and relaying the foundations for economic prosperity. It is very disappointing that there was no move to a multi-annual Budget in the recent UK spending review. That hampers the delivery of long-term strategic objectives, such as creating a culture of entrepreneurship and embedding apprenticeships at the heart of the skills programme. Successful economies promote a culture of innovation and investment in research and development across the business community. That increased productivity, which is the foundation for higher wages, is typically associated with higher-value-added, high-tech sectors like life and health sciences, advanced manufacturing and ICT. However, driving innovation can have huge benefits for the entire community.

Furthermore, it is important for us to lead from the front, push for a dynamic digital government strategy and develop a culture of innovation in the public sector. It is, therefore, concerning that no additional funding is clearly directed towards rebuilding the economy post-COVID. In addition, the Budget lacks a defined budget line for the upcoming skills strategy and long-awaited childcare strategy; both of which will have massive direct and indirect impacts on rebuilding the economy.

In comparison, another £1.3 million has been allocated to the preservation of the Maze site in my constituency, with no engagement on further development from the Executive Office in a year. I raise that point in every Budget debate, and will continue to do so until the economic opportunity of that massive piece of development is realised.

What is probably the best site in all of western Europe is sitting there gathering dust and idle. Shame. Shame.

### 3.00 pm

A key example of the lack of detail in the Budget is that there is no specific mention of funding to help Northern Ireland to achieve its environmental targets. Although it is a long-term issue, tackling the climate crisis will

require a response across all Departments, and funding coordination will be integral to achieving that.

Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) research has shown the percentage of electricity generated from renewable sources in Northern Ireland. Our natural assets create an opportunity to develop the renewable energy sector further. As well as delivering environmental benefits, there is the potential to deliver significant economic benefits and create jobs.

However, managing the viability of wind energy is a major challenge. Up to 18% of wind power here is thrown away because it cannot be used at the time that it is generated. That compares with 5% in the Republic. In the first half of 2020, 295 gigawatt hours of wind energy, worth £50 million, was thrown away.

The storage platform for the integration of renewable energy (SPIRE 2) project, which involves academic partners from Ulster University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow and Queen's University, is looking at the potential use of energy storage technologies in people's homes. As part of that project, the rural-led energy transition initiative is aimed at reducing or eliminating the risk of low-income households being left behind by the transition to clean-energy systems. That work could allow up to £100 million a year of clean energy to be used to tackle fuel poverty. Similarly, work should be done to see how that energy could be used for electric vehicles, ownership —

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

**Mr Catney:** — of which is estimated to increase 100-fold in the next 10 years. Those recommendations must be taken forward in a fully funded energy strategy to prevent Northern Ireland from falling further behind.

**Mr Irwin:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. There is no doubt that the financial climate in which we find ourselves is one of the most challenging for many years. COVID-19 has had a very serious impact on many areas of life. Of course, sadly, it has also caused a great cost to life itself, and many families have been plunged into grief following the loss of a loved one to the virus. It has also wreaked havoc across our business community, with many sectors being completely shut down for many weeks and months and many now facing an uncertain future as the lockdown eases and businesses begin to fully reopen.

With those prolonged business closures, there is no doubt that, without the significant central financial input of the Treasury, our journey through the pandemic would have been so much more difficult. Unprecedented levels of support have been offered to our Executive to mitigate the worst aspects of the crisis. That has meant vital cash for businesses to stay afloat and assistance for employees across the Province. Of course, that perfectly illustrates the real benefits of the Union, as we have seen the Chancellor and the Treasury offering unprecedented levels of support across the United Kingdom, with a very clear approach of supporting people in their hour of need. That Treasury support also extended heavily to the maintenance of our network of public services and directly supported many thousands of staff in the public sector at this time of pressure.

With regards to agriculture and the environment, the Budget document rightly refers to the importance of the agri-food sector in supporting around 100,000 jobs and contributing in the region of £5 billion to the local economy. The sector is vital to our economic future post-COVID and must be strategically supported on many fronts in the months ahead.

In recent weeks in the Chamber — indeed, as late as yesterday — we discussed climate change and climate action. In many ways, the agri-food sector is at the centre of that debate. I used those recent opportunities to call for clear thoughts and actions going forward. We must ensure that the actions that are taken to mitigate climate change are proportionate and help to sustain that important sector in Northern Ireland. That is of great importance.

The production of food and the maintenance of the environment is vital to life in Northern Ireland, and it would be foolish to bring forward too much change too quickly. Overambitious measures would serve only to destabilise the agri-food sector and do serious harm to Northern Ireland generally.

It is also vital that future financial support schemes are brought forward in line with any proposed climate action measures to assist farmers in assessing equipment and new ways of working. I welcome the Minister's efforts around green growth and his plans for the planting of 18 million trees in Northern Ireland, targeting climate change. That represents an essential step forward and one that will provide important benefits.

Brexit is another important area, especially for the farming community of which I am a member. As everyone knows, the protocol is never far from the headlines. The imposition of the unworkable protocol has been a total nightmare for agriculture and has meant the most ridiculous hold-ups, costs and procedures for farmers, suppliers, businesses and, indeed, hauliers. Brexit is referred to heavily in the Budget document, and it correctly states that it is one of the most significant changes in the sector for 40 years. Those changes, when taken in the context of moving away from the bureaucracy of the EU system, represent a great opportunity to create a thriving agri-food sector, playing to our strengths. However, that can be achieved only with the rejection of the protocol, and I welcome Minister Poots's commitment to erasing that unhelpful and costly barrier to trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. The righting of the protocol wrong will assist everyone and be of significant assistance to agriculture and many other sectors that are struggling with the nonsensical rules that hamper trade and ramp up costs for businesses and consumers alike. It will also assist in our budgets, where considerable financial resources are being required to operate the despised protocol. The fact that the grace period is quickly coming to an end and the difficulties that exist with having anywhere near the necessary staffing to effectively operate the protocol should be seen as a concerning and looming economic threat that must be dealt with effectively.

Food security is important, and the ability of Northern Ireland to produce high-quality food with the highest traceability standards is a quality that must be protected and enhanced. COVID-19 proved just how resilient our agri-food sector is. It continued to operate at full capacity throughout the pandemic, meeting consumer needs under significant strain. That has to be commended.

**Mr Muir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Irwin:** I will.

**Mr Muir:** I entirely agree with the Member about food quality and the importance of investing in ensuring that. Will the Member also agree that leaving the EU single market would be a retrograde step for food safety and that Northern Ireland needs to remain within that sphere?

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

**Mr Irwin:** I take on board the Member's comments, but I disagree with him in that regard.

Disease eradication continues to be a source of concern, with particular reference to bovine TB. We know just how costly the disease is to farmers and the Department generally. Despite the passage of time, progress remains much too sluggish in that regard, and the result of the current approach is that costs continue to mount and prevalence of the disease remains much too high. What is of further concern is the fact that funding around this area is under huge pressure. That points to an urgent requirement for improvement in eradication policies and practices to bring the disease under control.

The pandemic has certainly taken a toll on finances and financial forward planning, and there is a significant onus on all Departments to ensure that they target their resources effectively and avoid the return of unspent money. In the months ahead, resources will be under scrutiny and strain like never before. We must all do what we can to see resources used to their maximum advantage.

**Mrs Barton:** While we have had a year of considerable challenge due to the pandemic, the focus, quite rightly, was on saving lives, a pathway that Minister Swann was always focused on and never veered off. With the vaccination programme — recognised in Europe as one of the most successful — progressing at pace, with shops and non-essential retail having opened up and with the infection rate declining daily, it is only right that our attention turns to the revival and rebuilding of the rural and urban economy, including our agri-food sector.

During COVID, DAERA had an allocation of £25 million, and I welcome the further £9.8 million secured for further COVID-19 support in 2021-22. Looking at the Budget from a DAERA perspective, it is disappointing to learn that, once again, we have only a single-year Budget. This is not a multi-year Budget, which will be essential as we move forward. Long-term strategic planning is impossible. How can prosperity across Northern Ireland be promoted or a balanced and sustainable agri-food economy achieved when year-on-year cuts to the Budget are being made? DAERA must be equipped to support the agri-food sector, which is so vital to the local economy as it is worth £5 billion and supports in excess of 100,000 jobs. It is disappointing to see that the DAERA budget of £553.8 million has decreased by approximately 3%. DAERA will be one of the lead Departments in working towards the reduction of greenhouse gases and carbon emissions as Northern Ireland progresses its Climate Change Bill. Incentives are needed to encourage change on our farms by using machinery or promoting the green growth approach, which DAERA will be expected to deliver.

With the exit from the EU, it is anticipated that a new future agricultural policy framework will be launched specifically for Northern Ireland in the next year or so. That will bring about change in the basic payment and support for the agricultural economy. It is disappointing to learn that £315.6 million has been allocated for direct payments, which falls short of the £330 million manifesto commitment, meaning that £14.4 million of the projected EU funding for the next year has gone directly to Her Majesty's Treasury. Overall, there is a disappointing shortfall of £19.5 million in EU replacement funding. That will have a profound effect on DAERA's ability to examine new measures in the future Northern Ireland agricultural policy framework.

Of greater concern, however, is the reduction in the funding allocation of £5.1 million for the programme aimed at eradicating TB. That is an essential programme to ensure the well-being of our animals and the quality of the final product.

The capital investment allocations will permit DAERA to continue with many of its projects, including the £95.5 million that it took forward through a priority investment programme, with another £48.1 million for priority investment.

Overall, this is a disappointing Budget for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs at a time when agriculture faces such difficulties with the fallout from the protocol and the greater expenditure needed to prepare for the necessary changes that a climate change Act will bring about.

**Mr Durkan:** As already alluded to, this has been an incredibly difficult year for families and businesses. As we look towards a period of post-pandemic recovery, we are acutely aware of the significance of this Budget and its need to address the economic fallout of the crisis. The Budget, I am afraid, fails to do just that. While we appreciate the significant challenges and unique pressures that have presented this year, there appears to be no vision to tackle the urgent issues facing our society in the aftermath of COVID and beyond. That should be at the forefront of our minds today as we debate the motion.

The Communities Committee was briefed by officials last week, and they laid out the tough reality and blatant failure to deliver key objectives in the Department. As my party's social justice spokesperson, I will focus my remarks on our housing crisis and the dire situation facing our social security system and those dependent on it. All Departments will feel the pinch this financial year, but the impact of unmet bids on the Communities portfolio will reverberate around society, directly affecting the ability of people to weather the storm in a post-COVID landscape.

### 3.15 pm

While I sympathise with Departments — the COVID response has dominated all Departments — I urge Ministers to recognise that the Budget is part of that response. Figures highlighted a 90% increase in universal credit claims last year, a figure that is set to soar further as furlough ends and our businesses face the double challenge of the pandemic and leaving the EU. The Economy Minister has estimated that over 100,000 will be unemployed. The rise in the number of new applicants highlights even more starkly the gaps in current

protections. People who currently receive the benefits and the people making their applications now and in future need the certainty and assurance that they will be protected against the sort of system that the Tories would impose on them. The reality is that, under this Budget, they will not be.

The £42.8 million directed at extending welfare mitigations is welcome. However, our Communities Minister had promised a raft of mitigations that have gone unmet in the Budget, including new welfare mitigations; additional payments for carers, those in low-income households and people with a terminal illness; and offsetting the impact of the cruel two-child limit, which affects nearly 3,000 households. It is a frightening prospect that, when need has never been greater and the financial outlook more precarious, people are effectively being left without protections. Consideration must also be given to worsening health outcomes as a result of our awful waiting lists, which will inevitably force more and more people into a benefits system that is already under immense pressure.

It is welcome that the cut to the independent advice sector floated in the draft Budget has been reversed, that the Job Start scheme is going ahead and that recruitment is finally under way to beef up our benefits workforce. However, it is deeply concerning that, other than that, no allocation has been *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* New Decade, New Approach. The Budget does not tackle poverty *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* We are in the grip *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* the full impact of COVID is realised.

A roof over your head is the basis for a healthy life and for cohesive policymaking. There are few areas of public and social policy that housing does not affect, and the housing crisis needs a multifaceted solution. We urgently need to build more social housing to accommodate the thousands of people on waiting lists. Our social housing stock is nowhere near the level that it needs to be. The Executive pledge under the New Decade, New Approach deal to enhance investment in new build social housing is another promise apparently forgotten. Improved social housing must remain a key objective, not just to address the current demand or need but to boost the construction industry and create vital jobs. We also need to look towards a reformed private rented sector and the repurposing of existing stock. None of us can honestly be satisfied with the current rate at which we build social homes.

The absolute minimum that the Executive should be able to guarantee to everyone in the North is a secure and accessible home. Over 29,000 families here are on a waiting list and in acute need of a home. Just this month, the Communities Minister confirmed in response to my Assembly question that over 80,000 people, most with disabilities, are on the social housing waiting list seeking a ground floor property, yet, in the past five years, only 164 bungalows have been built. How, then, can the Finance Minister justify the lack of investment in housing transformation, and what are the potential ramifications of those vital requirements not being met?

Some £6 million has been directed towards Supporting People, which, for the reasons previously outlined, will be a vital provision in the months ahead. Yet that is a COVID-related allocation and represents just half of the required funding. We must also bear it in mind that, even though demand has grown massively, that programme has not

experienced an increase in funding in over a decade. It is unforgivable that allocations to date have not reflected the increasing demand for housing support services. In effect, that has failed extremely vulnerable individuals. There is more to tackling homelessness than building homes; we need to tackle the root causes and give people the support that they need.

The most lamentable aspect of the paper before us is the glaring lack of strategic foresight. Prevention is the best cure. The SDLP has appealed for a mortgage support scheme to prevent families losing their home as a result of the economic hardship brought about by the pandemic.

Although Minister Hargey recently assured me that such a scheme is under review, it is conspicuous by its absence from the Budget.

The economic fallout from the pandemic makes the grim prospect of families struggling to pay their mortgages highly likely if not inevitable. On top of the personal trauma and distress that that causes those people and their families, it places pressure on an already buckling housing system. I stood in the Chamber in October, pleading for serious consideration and outlining the need to introduce such a scheme, but in our book it is inexcusable that that does not even feature seven months later.

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

**Mr Durkan:** Given the economic situation that we face in the coming months and years, it is with a heavy heart that we debate today's Budget. We cannot endorse its shortcomings and outright failings. Before long, the gaps will become gaping holes, which will be surely felt as society struggles to get back on its feet.

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

**Mr Chambers:** This is a Budget of two halves. The additional £380 million of COVID funding will be crucial in the months ahead as we continue at pace with the very successful vaccination programme and concentrate our efforts on rebuilding and restoring as much elective activity as quickly as possible. However, while the additional funding is welcome, it should not be used to shield or deflect from the fact that much of it will have to be used to meet inescapable pressures and maintain key existing services in our health service.

As far as the Ulster Unionist Party is concerned, tackling our waiting lists must become one of the Executive's greatest collective priorities. Unfortunately, this Budget is instead largely made up of non-recurrent funding, which does not provide the certainty or security that is needed to tackle the absolutely appalling waiting lists on a sustainable footing. The current Finance Minister, like all Finance Ministers before him, is no doubt aware that short-term funding boosts do little for the health service. Knowing what money it will have in the years to come allows it to appoint and train staff and commission the services that are necessary to meet the demand.

The Health Minister has been very clear about how he wants to streamline the system, increase capacity and instil new ways of working. However, as well as additional funding, that will require clear political buy-in. Clinicians and patients are already travelling outside previous boundaries to deliver and receive care. We should learn

from what is working well and extrapolate it across the system.

I welcome the additional allocation of just over £52 million to help to fund the Agenda for Change pay uplift as well as the further £20 million for safe staffing. It seems like a lifetime ago, but it was only 16 months ago that there was serious unrest among our health workers. Yet, within days of taking office, the Health Minister had pulled together a package that restored pay parity and ultimately saw the unprecedented industrial action ended. The additional funding, as well as the clear commitment to safe staffing, was a key part of that.

If ever there was an occasion for the Assembly and all the parties in it to pledge to work together to evolve long-term budgeting and strategies to eradicate the unacceptable waiting lists for elective surgery and consultant appointments, it is now. It is certainly not a time for anyone to try to make political capital out of the current difficulties that our health and social care sector faces. Doing so would be recognised by the people of Northern Ireland for what it was.

Hard decisions will need to be taken. The Health Minister will not shy away from making those calls, and they will not be made with any selfish political considerations in mind but rather because the transformation of our health service will be in the best long-term interests of the people of Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party will support those hard decisions because it is the right thing to do.

**Ms Hunter:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate in my capacity as the SDLP's health spokesperson. We are facing the biggest crisis in the NHS of any of our lifetimes. The pandemic has not only greatly exacerbated an already dangerous situation but has served to highlight the faults and gaps in our healthcare system. Real people in real pain are behind the waiting list statistics. Greater levels of funding would help alleviate some of the most pressing and urgent issues, such as waiting lists, which are truly in a dire and deeply alarming state, and, most importantly, red-flag procedures such as cancer surgeries and treatments. Forty million pounds is not enough to tackle all of that. It is crucial that we invest correctly in order to help preserve life and provide improved quality of life for all our people who are currently on waiting lists.

Earlier this week, it was heartbreaking and deeply concerning to hear the Department of Health's estimate that it could take anywhere from five to 10 years to address the current waiting lists. There are real people on those waiting lists who are deteriorating and living with chronic pain. As time passes, their conditions only worsen and are somewhat irreversible. Really addressing the health crisis will require extensive reform and possibly a complete reimagining of our services. Money talks, and it is undoubtedly needed in order to support the regeneration of our NHS and how we do things.

What we have currently is a two-tier system. Those who can afford to go private do so, and their lives improve. Oftentimes, many are using their life savings, which is so sad. Others who cannot afford to go private, suffer and wait, wait and suffer, often dying on the waiting list. That is a sad and horrific reality of which none of us can be proud. We must make our health service run effectively and efficiently, but, to do so, we need a better Budget: one with ambition and vision. I am very disappointed that I do not

see that today. As a result, we still see many challenges as we come out of COVID.

I welcome the funding that has been allocated in this year's Budget for mental health, but I am deeply disappointed that, in a 74-page Budget document, mental health is mentioned only twice. It is arguably one of the biggest difficulties that we will encounter coming out of the pandemic. The physical and mental well-being of people who are on waiting lists is at utmost risk. Many people have been willing to be patient during the COVID crisis, but, as we emerge from it, patience is wearing very thin. The Budget does nothing to tackle proactively the historical waiting lists, and it is important today to highlight that evident failure.

As a young person looking at the health service, I am filled with dread. Those waiting lists will take a significant amount of time to fix, but doing that is heavily dependent on having the correct funding. We all know or love somebody who is waiting on an appointment. That is the reality for one in four people in Northern Ireland. Over 300,000 are currently awaiting a treatment, a surgery or a meeting with a consultant. We must be ambitious and creative in tackling waiting lists so that we can improve their lives. Surely there is more that can be done. We must work harder and smarter for the results that our citizens deserve.

I will conclude with a few quick comments and questions to the Finance Minister. On 13 May 2021, Minister, your Sinn Féin colleague and health spokesperson in the South said:

*"Waiting lists have been allowed to spiral over the last decade, due to chronic underfunding and neglect by the Government. This isn't good enough and patients across the state are being forced to suffer the consequences of this Government failure."*

Now is our opportunity to tackle underfunding and neglect in the North, but, unfortunately, looking through the Budget that the Minister has put forward today, I feel that it lacks the vision and ambition that his colleagues have been calling for to address waiting lists in the South. Minister, I ask you this today: what more can you and your Department do to tackle waiting lists and to provide the appropriate funding so that they can be tackled?

I have another concern. Although it is good to see other political parties regarding waiting lists as a priority, I respectfully ask this: with the resources that you have, Minister, including civil servants in your Department, a joint First Minister, multiple Ministers and spads, what more creative and innovative ways and what vision do you have to help tackle issues in the health service? It is really important today to highlight some of the failures in the Budget. It is crucial to mention that, although it is good to have a cross-party commitment to improving waiting lists, we have not seen that today.

### 3.30 pm

**Mr Allister:** What other country in the world, in its centenary year, would produce a Budget without that centenary even being mentioned and without a penny in it to celebrate that centenary? It is a shame on every party that is part of the Government in this House that they collectively produced a Budget, so ashamed of the centenary of the place where they are the Government,

in which it is not mentioned and there is not one penny to mark it. There is not a single penny for a community grant from the Department for Communities for those who might want to celebrate it. Nothing.

Indeed, Minister Murphy told us that not a single Department applied for a line in the Budget to mark the centenary. That is a staggering indictment, particularly of those who profess, outside of the House, their pride in Northern Ireland and this centenary. It is no surprise, maybe, from Mr Murphy, because what sort of a country produces a Budget in a centenary year without mentioning it or that does not want money for it? Maybe, the sort of country that has, as its Finance Minister, someone who thought it appropriate to join a terrorist organisation to seek to bomb that very country out of existence. Now, he is in the smug position to deliver a Budget that delivers such an insult to this place called Northern Ireland of which he is the Minister of Finance. Of course, he did much more than that. He rubbed the nose of every unionist in the dirt when he refused to allow a centenary stone within the grounds of Parliament Buildings, as did the Assembly Commission when, subject to the same belligerent Sinn Féin veto, it refused a centenary stone within the curtilage of this very Building.

Yet, this Budget can find room for squander. The Minister told us about £1.6 million for a translation hub to translate into Irish and Ulster Scots. I asked some questions for written answer of every Minister in the House. If we are going to have a translation hub, where is the demand for translation? I asked every Department how many requests they had in 2017-18, 2019-2020 and 2020-21 for translation of departmental documents into Irish or Ulster Scots. Of the five Departments that have answered so far, here are the results. They rival the UK's performance in Eurovision and probably have the same political connotations. The Health Department had no requests. The Department for Infrastructure, in three years, had eight requests for Irish and none for Ulster Scots. The Department of Agriculture, in three years, had no requests. The Department of Finance, in three years, had five requests for Irish and one for Ulster Scots; that will be a quare challenge. The Department of Justice had no requests. In three years, there were 13 requests to translate government documents into Irish and one such request for a translation into Ulster Scots. Yet, according to the document, that Department wants to spend, the Minister tells us, £1.6 million on a translation hub. We hear today of the billion pounds and more that our health service will need to tackle waiting lists, but the Government prioritise a translation hub that no one needs and that is not required, because everyone who reads government documents can also read English, in which they are published. For the political optics, however, we must, at a time of COVID, spend £1.6 million on such nonsense. What a sordid commentary on the Executive.

Then we find in the document that Mr Poots's Department wants to spend another £18.8 million on implementing the protocol. Mr Poots tells us that he is opposed to the protocol, and yet, in the Budget document, he is looking for EU exit staff costs of £18.8 million. How could Brussels ever take seriously anyone who says that they want to dismantle the protocol when, at the same time, they ask for —

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

**Mr Allister:** — almost £19 million to implement it? That is another part of the farce of this House.

**Mr McCrossan (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee):** I speak today as the Chairperson of the Audit Committee to reflect the scrutiny of the 2021-22 Budget for the Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).

As the House is aware, the Audit Committee scrutinises and agrees the budgets and estimates of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and lays the estimates before the Assembly. The Committee also scrutinises the Commission's budget and is actively pursuing codification of that role, with a view to extending it to include consideration of the Commission's estimates. In recognition of the independence of the non-ministerial bodies, the Committee fulfils those budgetary functions in place of the Department of Finance. Following considerable scrutiny of the 2021-22 budgets for the three bodies, the Committee agreed its initial budget position document in December 2020. A debate specifically on the Commission's budget took place in the Chamber on 2 March 2021.

I wish to reflect on some particular areas covered during the Committee deliberations. I will start with the Assembly Commission. The Commission has a legal requirement to meet all costs associated with Members, including salaries, allowances, expenses, Members' staffing costs and pension contributions. Those budget elements are determination-driven and are not under the control of the Commission. However, the Committee considered those areas that are under the control of the Commission.

In relation to the capital budget, members recognised that resources were needed to address underinvestment in the fabric of the Building in the last three years. The areas discussed during evidence sessions with officials included electronic access control; the security management system; the audio system in the Chamber; updates to the telephone and television systems in Parliament Buildings, which are ongoing; and the potential financial impact of roof repairs to Parliament Buildings. Other resource elements considered included some income-generation options for the Commission, such as the use of Parliament Buildings for weddings and ceremonies and the staffing implications of a fully functioning Assembly.

In relation to the Audit Office, members questioned the officials on its accommodation project and the increasing cost from the concept design estimates that were shared with the Committee previously. However, it was noted that the increase was due to moving to a detailed design process, allowances for COVID-19 and construction inflation in the current marketplace. Discussions also took place around the costs associated with the Audit Office's continuing recruitment process, which is intended to achieve the appropriate balance in skills and expertise in the organisation in order to allow it to operate effectively, and the potential impact on income with the loss of European agricultural funding for rural development. The challenge of taking forward some of the RHI inquiry recommendations was also discussed at length.

During evidence sessions with the NIPSO and her officials, questions were asked around the resources required to deal with the projected increase in maladministration work and the additional staff needed to place a greater focus on learning and development work. It is hoped that that will lead to increased awareness and insight around complaints and ultimately result in improvements in public service delivery. The resources needed to allow the NIPSO to provide a high-quality, impartial and independent investigation service were also subject to discussion, including the resources needed to increase the capacity for own-initiative investigations. The Committee was keen to see commencement of complaints standards authority powers for NIPSO, and members paid particular attention to the resources needed to recruit appropriate staff and to put necessary systems in place.

As I have already mentioned, the Committee agreed its initial position on the draft budgets for the three bodies in December 2020, but, following correspondence from the Minister of Finance in relation to pay pressures and the public-sector pay freeze, the Committee revised its position to take the pay freeze into account. I can confirm that the Department of Finance Budget document has made provision for figures agreed by the Audit Committee.

I will now make remarks as an MLA for West Tyrone and the spokesperson on education for the SDLP. Some Members have mentioned that this is a disappointing Budget, and that is putting it lightly. There are many aspects of this Budget that lack vision, that lack strategy and that lack prioritisation of key, important issues that affect our constituents on the ground and on a daily basis. Members across the House have shared concerns about the state of our health service and about the waiting lists that are growing by the hour, let alone the day. People's pain is increasing, and they are becoming even more challenged by the circumstances that they find themselves in. When they seek support and help and the necessary medical attention, they are told that they are on the waiting list. As my colleague Cara Hunter said, people are literally dying on these waiting lists. That is a terrible indictment of the political failure of these institutions and of the Executive to deal with this fundamental issue, and it is not as a result of coronavirus. This predates coronavirus and was a problem then. What did we as an Assembly do, and what did parties of the Executive who were in a position of power and strength do, then? They walked out the door for three years, collapsing the institutions on the very feet of the people who were struggling and needing intervention and medical support. That is a terrible indictment and reflection of the political failure of this place that needs to stop. I know that the majority of constituents whom I speak for and represent in West Tyrone share that frustration as well.

Looking to roads, I see elected representatives across the various political parties, particularly Sinn Féin, standing next to potholes. These are not just councillors but MPs — abstentionist MPs, at that — and MLAs standing next to potholes, pointing at the road and saying, "Isn't this terrible?". I agree. It is terrible, and it should be resolved, but, unfortunately, in this Budget and after many bids from Minister Mallon, there has been no meaningful investment laid out by Minister Murphy as the Minister of Finance, the man who holds the purse, the man who holds the money, the man who has failed to provide adequate funding to the Department for Infrastructure, which has an

outstanding Minister who is delivering on the ground for people but has been hamstrung as a result of a Finance Minister who is not coughing up the funds to deal with the roads — roads that run through every single community in Northern Ireland and that are becoming more and more embarrassing as the day goes on. This Finance Minister —

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

**Mr McCrossan:** — needs to put his money where his mouth is and start delivering for the priorities of people on the ground.

**Mr Carroll:** This Budget utterly fails to meet the transformational change that we so desperately need in the wake of a global health pandemic, as we sit on the brink of climate catastrophe and as economic crisis and widespread social need grow. I have made my views on this Budget clear. Indeed, many in this Chamber have also recognised today its failure to deal with waiting lists, poverty and many more issues, yet the Minister is asking us to approve it and to accept the continuation of the damaging conditions that our communities have faced for far too long. I will certainly not be supporting the Budget today, and I wonder whether Members from Executive parties who have rightly condemned Minister Murphy's Budget will stand by their words and refuse to endorse it. Will they join me in pushing to reject these huge shortcomings? We will wait and see.

The Minister has presented this as a standstill Budget. Indeed, this is the very year when the Budget should break away from the neoliberalism of the past, address increasing needs and adjust for rising costs.

It harks back instead to an era of politics plagued by neoliberalism and underfunding. There has been no attempt at all to expand and properly fund the health service, community services or transport services, to name a few. All those areas were in crisis long before the Budget, but there is no attempt to bail them out financially. The Budget imposes effective reductions in funding for welfare support, homeless and mental health services and a real-terms cut for public transport.

### 3.45 pm

It is particularly insulting that one of the most effective organisations in this city and one that my constituency office uses, the Belfast citywide tribunal service, which assists people with the brutal welfare reform system, was not allocated sufficient funding to keep its doors open over the next year and beyond by the Communities Minister as part of the Budget. The workers in that service do not know whether they have a job from year-to-year. That is not where the threat to workers and jobs ends.

Public-sector pay is devolved, yet the best that the Minister can offer civil servants is 1%. That is a slap in the face for those workers. My solidarity and full support go to those in NIPSA who are balloting on action against that meagre pay cut. The Hovis workers show what can be done to fight against pay cuts and freezes. If there is a strike for NIPSA workers, I will certainly support them.

The lack of allocation for health pay is a further disgrace. A year on from giving the commitment to increase the minimum wage, the Executive have done nothing. That is offensive to many working people, who deserve better. The



Budget shows clearly that they are not a priority for the Executive. The Minister tries to make much of the Health budget increase of 5.7% in resource spending on last year, but health costs are estimated to have risen by roughly 6.5%, which is a reduction in real terms in the middle of a health pandemic, no less.

Where is the £75 million set aside for transformation that was previously promised? Where is the money to review adult care via 'Power to People'? Where is the £6.5 million for the extra nursing and midwifery student places that were designed to alleviate pressure? We heard from the Health Minister at the Health Committee, last week or the week before, about the lack of investment in mental health services. Where is the increase in provision for counselling? Where is the money that was set aside to rebuild cancer, oncology and haematology services and for improvements in palliative care and many other issues? Where is the increased provision for those in need of IVF treatment, to name just a few of the issues?

The Department for Infrastructure faces the same fate. With inflationary increases, the Budget represents a real-terms reduction. The document is littered with none too subtle threats of future cutbacks. We are told that Translink may need to consider "service reductions" and:

*"there are likely to be significant impacts on public service delivery, including in areas such as public transport and roads maintenance."*

Twenty-four hours after the Minister's party signs up to the politics of a green new deal, he lays down a threat to public transport, footways and street lighting, and he cannot even provide for a proper winter gritting service. That is a very worrying sign that working-class people will pay for the crisis once again.

The legacy of previous Stormont Budgets and decisions is well illustrated by the fact that we will pay out tens of millions of pounds in interest on private finance initiatives (PFIs) over the next year. That is a colossal waste of public money, brought about by the same parties that were also responsible for the likes of the renewable heat incentive (RHI); the same parties that lobbied Westminster for a decade to let them lower corporation tax for the wealthiest; and the same parties that struggled to spend a lot of money — it was hundreds of millions — on COVID support.

The same parties will roll their Ministers out to tell us that their hands are tied and that they cannot find the money for public services in the Budget. We have some outstanding journalists here, but, to put it frankly, the Executive get off lightly with how little they are held to account for what goes on in this Building and for the lasting impact that has on communities. I am sure that the big parties are very glad of that today.

That is not to say that the Minister gives journalists an easy job. The figures for the Budget are so general and broad-sweeping that it is next to impossible to detail exactly where the money will go. Where is the scrutiny? Where is the accountability, as others said today? We were barely given a chance to scrutinise it effectively or properly in our Committees. How on earth is any member of the press or public to ascertain from that where the money is going?

The failure of the Budget to protect young people, sick people and the environment is a gross abdication of duty. It

is an attack on the working class, and we need, ultimately, an economic strategy that is based on redistributing wealth and providing for those in need. The Budget from the Sinn Féin Minister is the antithesis of that. For that reason and many more, I intend to vote against it today.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Before I call the Minister to make his winding-up speech, I remind him of the convention that Members and Ministers seeking to amend their own motion are invited to address the motion and the amendment together when winding. The Minister will have up to 23 minutes, and I invite him to conclude the debate on the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** I thank Members and Committee Chairs for their participation in the debate. I thank Members who supported the Budget proposals for their input, and I listened with interest to Members who spoke against them. With the last couple of Members to speak, certainly the two in the corner, I am interested to see whether, rather than simply speaking against the Budget, they vote against it. I will try to respond to as many of the points raised as possible, although multiple points were raised by all who spoke and some of those were overlapping and cross-cutting.

I thank the Chair of the Finance Committee for his contribution. He raised the question of the notice given for the debate. That was an error in the Department. The Committee was not made aware of the exact timing, and I apologise for that oversight. I understand that the Committee was anticipating the debate, but we need to ensure that that does not happen again.

Dr Aiken raised points about streamlining the Budget process and the difficulties of that. I spoke about that before taking up this post, and I am determined to assist in delivering a more streamlined, accessible and understandable Budget process. The ongoing review of the financial process will help Members and the wider public to scrutinise the Budget, the Estimates and the accounts. We intend to take forward that work in the not-too-distant future.

The Member raised a number of other points about the fiscal council and its role. He has been speaking to people who have experience of fiscal councils, and the issue of independence has been raised by the Committee. I assure him that the council is an independent entity and will continue to be so. It will provide independent analysis of the Budget process.

Dr Aiken, the Chair of the Justice Committee and others asked about the victims' payments. They will be aware that, along with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Justice, I have given an undertaking that payments will be made to successful applicants under the scheme. We remain committed to delivering the scheme and are mindful of the needs of the victims and survivors who will be the recipients of the payments. That 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. However, it remains the position of the Executive that the British Government should meet the costs of the expanded scheme legislated for by Westminster, and we continue to progress that. On occasion, the Member has referred to the idea of top-slicing Departments: I have always said that, if we cannot reach agreement with

Westminster and have to meet the costs, that is one option for the Executive, but we intend to pursue vigorously with Treasury the funding of the scheme.

Dr Aiken also asked about the New Deal funding and the Community Renewal Fund. The Member may recall that the New Deal fund is outside the control of the Executive and is administered by the NIO. It is a matter of concern that that fund and others, such as the Community Renewal Fund, which are EU replacement funds, are administered by Whitehall, although the funding is clearly in the devolved space. The Community Renewal Fund and EU replacement funding were also mentioned by Maoliosa McHugh and Paula Bradley. We continue to be concerned about a lack of information on the replacement of EU funding. To date, our sense is that it will not match the funding that came with European membership, and the interference in our ability to distribute and prioritise that funding remains an ongoing concern that we continue to raise with Treasury, as do the Finance Ministers for Scotland and Wales.

The Budget exchange scheme — the carry-over of spending — works on the basis of an ongoing analysis of the provisional out-turn and an assessment of the funding that can be carried forward under the scheme limits. At this stage, I am reasonably confident that we remain within our agreed limits: non-ring-fenced resource DEL of £85.8 million and capital DEL of £22.3 million.

A number of Members raised issues about multi-annual Budgets, and we have made repeated requests to the British Government about that. Part of the position here is that we are in a cycle of one-year Budgets.

It was very late notice. We were advised over the year that there would be a multi-annual Budget cycle. In my discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer a fortnight ago, I was assured that that would be the position from next year onwards. We certainly hope that that is the case, and we will hold him to that promise.

The Chair of the Economy Committee raised issues about the discretion that the Department for the Economy will have with regard to the economic recovery action plan, which includes £145 million for the high street support scheme. The remaining funds are to be used at the Department's discretion for economic support measures. The discretion is not extended to other funds and does not remove the need for business cases to be completed to support expenditure decisions and for expenditure proposals that are above the Department's delegated limits. Those business cases must be submitted to the Department of Finance for approval.

The Chair also raised a point, as others did, about the furlough scheme coming to an end. We have talked to Treasury about the importance of the furlough scheme. We recognise the support that the furlough scheme has provided, and we will engage with Treasury about the importance of the scheme as we move into a new phase of economic recovery. There is a real fear among employers about approaching a cliff edge.

The Chair of the Justice Committee and Mike Nesbitt raised the issue of funding for policing. The Budget has allocated £12.3 million for police numbers, which will help to progress the NDNA priority of 7,500 officers. The Executive will decide on future Budgets, and that issue will undoubtedly form part of those deliberations.

Questions were raised about a number of Departments. Kellie Armstrong asked about the Department for Communities. I am happy to say that, last week, the Executive agreed over £50 million of COVID-19 funding for the Department for Communities to help to address some of the issues that the Member raised, including support for arts, culture and sports. Of course, all Departments remain significantly challenged.

**Dr Aiken:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Murphy:** I am prepared to give way, but I have limited time.

**Dr Aiken:** Sorry, my intervention is very limited.

Apologies, Minister, but I have to chair another meeting. It means no disrespect to you that I am heading off. I am sure that my able Deputy Chair will do what is required. I am not sure whether he will do it using a 'Star Wars' theme.

**Mr Murphy:** I appreciate the Chair's advice.

A question was asked about the Programme for Government's alignment with the Budget. Of course, that is and has been the intention since the Executive returned. The difficulty with that is twofold: first, an annual Budget and, secondly, dealing with the pandemic. As we get reassurance from the Treasury in the time ahead, I would like to see us getting back to that issue.

Pat Catney raised a number of issues about new spending and NDNA money. We could not include some of the money that came late, as the Secretary of State had not signed off on it. It is not included in the document, and we made that clear at the start. You cannot have new spending if you have a flat-cash Budget, unless you take it off other Departments, so that is impossible.

I enjoyed Robin Newton's Mr Micawber proposals. He would have been a tax-and-spend man: you spend only what you have. The other Governments are looking at spend and tax to try to stimulate economic recovery, and I hope that that direction is thought through in the future. It allows investment in necessary services and infrastructure and allows prosperity to be generated through the spending of government money and tax returns on the back of that.

Jim Allister raised the issue of the translation hub and criticised the lack of spending on the centenary. The cost of the translation hub is £160,000. I think that the Member said £1.6 million. It is £0.16 million, which I clearly said in my statement.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Murphy:** I am happy to give way.

**Mr Allister:** I said £1.6 million because that is exactly the figure that the Minister said in his first speech today.

**Mr Murphy:** If that is the case, I apologise. The figure is £0.16 million. We will not haggle over a decimal point, but I am glad that that matter can be cleared up.

From the number of SDLP Members giving speeches, it is clear that they have decided to go into election mode on the Budget statement. That memo has not been shared with other parties. The SDLP has gone back to the position that it has tried to hold over the past 14 years with limited success: straddling two positions at one time.

**4.00 pm**

**Mr Catney:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Murphy:** No. A litany of SDLP Members have spoken, and I have listened to them all. I now have the opportunity to reply to them. They are attempting to straddle two positions — being in the Executive and in opposition — at the same time. They spoke passionately and vociferously against the Budget proposition, looking for new spend, new vision and new ideas, yet, when we got notice on 24 November that we had a flat-cash, one-year Budget, the SDLP accepted, at the Executive, that there was no other prospect for the Executive but to accept a rollover Budget. That was agreed by all Ministers on the Executive. The SDLP agreed that the only way of doing new thinking, new vision and new spending was by taking money off other Departments and allocating it to wherever we wanted to see that new vision, and, in the time frame afforded to us, that was not possible. The SDLP therefore accepted that at Executive level, but today its Members have decided that they are on an election footing. They claim credit for things that the Executive do, as they will do in the time ahead — if that works for them, more fool the people — and ignore the fact that there is a 29% increase in the Department for Infrastructure's capital budget.

I have just listened to Mr McCrossan complaining about roads. For this year, the Department for Infrastructure received the biggest increase and largest capital allocation in its history, so I hope that there will not be a need for any more photographs beside potholes and that SDLP Members will be able to celebrate all the money that the Minister for Infrastructure has to spend. That approach is an attempt to claim the credit for the Executive's work and anything that is done — certainly anything that is done by their ministerial colleague — and to blame us all for the rest of the problems arising out of a bad budgetary outcome, which we have clearly acknowledged.

One of the benefits of being in this institution for as long as I have is that I can remember positions that people took in the past. In the past, the SDLP used to vote against the Budget, even though it was in the Executive. Occasionally, it put forward some fairly ill-thought-out suggestions as to how we could do things differently. It once suggested that we sell off the forests and, indeed, airports that we did not own in order to raise funding. They have learnt a lesson from that, so its Members are not bringing forward any policy positions or suggestions as to how, with this limited Budget, they would do things differently. They will probably vote for the Budget while pretending to oppose it at the same time. The SDLP's consistent position over the past number of years is that it has never had any workable propositions to do things better, particularly in the context of a one-year, standstill Budget, yet it professes to oppose all the necessary measures in this Budget.

I have been about here for so long that I can remember the portfolios that SDLP Ministers once held. They held the Department of Finance and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) portfolios — you will remember it, Mr Speaker — at the same time. DEL had responsibility for further and higher education. The fact that the SDLP ran both those Departments meant that it had the possibility of doing something with the university in Derry, had it wanted to.

It also held the Department for Social Development portfolio. I listened to a lecture from Mr Durkan about what all needed to be done on housing, but he ignores the fact that £160 million has been set aside for social housing this year. That is an 11% increase on last year. The policy that the SDLP has adopted is as transparent as it is dishonest. We all know the impact of bad Budgets. We are dealing with one this year, as we have done for many years, as a consequence of austerity policies from Whitehall: austerity policies that Mr O'Toole was paid to write press releases endorsing when he worked in Whitehall, as we here were battling their impact.

We know that waiting lists are crucial and critical. They affect all parties and all members of society. The response to that is for all Ministers to work together, constructively, with the limited resources that they have and not to attempt to exploit the misery of waiting lists for some hoped-for electoral advantage.

It is the responsibility of a Finance Minister to bring Budget proposals before the House. That is a responsibility that I take seriously, whether they are Budget proposals with a lot of resources attached or with very limited resources, as is the case today. Following the successful roll-out of the vaccine programme, together with the decisive actions of the Executive, we are entering a new phase of the COVID-19 response. The Executive are looking forward to how best they can support our economy and our people in their recovery. In a world where the future economic, social and health landscape is uncertain, it is imperative that we provide the platform that is needed for public services to respond to changing demands.

This Budget seeks to support key services now and is a platform for future responsive planning. On that note, I commend the Budget to the Assembly for approval.

*Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Before we turn to the vote on the amended motion, I remind Members that the vote on this motion requires cross-community support.

*Main Question, as amended, put.*

**Some Members:** Aye.

**Some Members:** No.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members that they should continue to uphold social distancing and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come into the Chamber.

I ask Members to take their seats. Before I put the Question, I remind Members that it would be preferable to avoid a Division.

*Question put a second time.*

**Some Members:** Aye.

**Some Members:** No.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. 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 yourself and other Members when moving around the Chamber or the Rotunda and especially in the Lobbies. Please be patient at all times, observe the signage and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks. Clear the Lobbies.

*The Assembly divided:*  
Ayes 80; Noes 5.

## AYES

### Nationalist

*Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Brogan, Mr Catney, 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, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.*

### UNIONIST:

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.*

### Other

*Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald and Ms Dolan.*

## NOES

### UNIONIST:

*Mr Allister, Ms Sugden.*

### Other

*Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Allister and Mr Carroll.*

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>[94.1%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>[94.7%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>[70.0%]</i>

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2021-22 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 1 April 2021 and the further detailed information provided to Members on 27 April 2021 and laid on 19 May 2021.*

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

### School Estate: East Antrim

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Mr Gordon Lyons to raise the matter of the school estate in East Antrim. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes.

**Mr Lyons:** First, I thank the Business Committee for scheduling the debate. At the outset, I apologise on behalf of my party and constituency colleague Mr David Hilditch, who is unable to be here. As most in the Chamber will know, he is getting chemotherapy treatment today. Of course, we wish him well with that and with the rest of his treatment.

I pay tribute to staff in schools right across East Antrim for all the work that they have done in what has been a very difficult year. I thank teachers, who have been put under huge pressure over the past number of months. We recognise that teaching from home and having to balance many different priorities at once has not been easy. I thank the senior management teams in schools, who have come under an awful lot of pressure and had to deal with an awful lot of uncertainty and a very fluid situation when schools were open and then closed, and all the additional pressures that came with that. I also thank other staff in schools, who have, perhaps, had additional responsibilities and work that they had to be involved in. They have done that work well. It is important to place on record our thanks to those who have done so much to try to ensure that children's education has continued, albeit in difficult situations and less than ideal scenarios.

As we get back to normal, the old problems persist. Many pupils in East Antrim are being educated in less than ideal facilities and poor accommodation. I want to raise a few issues with the House and the Minister. The first relates to the rationalisation of the school estate. Along with Mr Hilditch and other colleagues, who are here, we have all, in some way, been involved with Islandmagee Primary School and the long saga of getting it a new build. It has been over 10 years since I was first involved in meetings about Islandmagee Primary School. The school came about as the result of the merger of two schools: Kilcoan Primary School and Mullaghduh Primary School. The new school building had been talked about for a long time. The new school has been operating on split sites since 2016. Here we are, five years later, and it is still on split sites.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyons:** Of course, I will give way to Mr Beggs.

**Mr Beggs:** Is the Member aware that it predates even that date and that the school originated from a proposal to merge three schools?

**Mr Lyons:** Yes. Indeed, that is the case, although I think that the third school had closed down quite some time prior to that, and it was the two schools that I mentioned that merged in 2016. However, the Member is absolutely right.

Progress has been made. I am pleased that I was able to host the chairman of the board of governors and the principal, Arlene Cambridge, who, by the way, has done a fantastic job for that school and has been very determined

over the last number of years, and that we were able to meet the former Education Minister, Mr O'Dowd.

I am pleased that progress has been made and that the application is in the system. However, five years after the schools merged, never mind all the time that has passed since it was originally discussed, there is still no building. That shows some of the problems with rationalisation.

#### 4.30 pm

**Mr Stewart:** I thank the Member for giving way. I, too, pay tribute to Arlene Cambridge for the work that she has done.

I was speaking to a pupil who was in primary 1 when the merger went through who has now graduated from university. That is the length of time that we are talking about. My fear — I am sure that it also that of the Member — is that the pupils at Carrickfergus Academy might well see something similar. I fear that no one who is at that school will see a single new school site come to fruition. Does the Member share those fears?

**Mr Lyons:** I absolutely agree with the Member. In fact, the second example that I was coming on to was Carrickfergus Academy. Again, we have all been involved with that school. We were there when the Minister was there and had other meetings together. Mr Dickson was ill at the time of those meetings, but he sent a representative to them, and it is good that there is cross-party agreement.

Carrickfergus Academy is a very poor example of how to do things. Two schools amalgamated — they are now in their third year of amalgamation — and the school is on a split site. As a result of that split site, there are 318 staff movements between the junior and senior sites every week. That is staff moving back and forward for different periods and subjects. Of the 83 staff members, 73 of them travel, and some teachers teach in 10 different classrooms each week. That is a waste of teacher time and a duplication of provision and overheads. It also restricts opportunities for young people.

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyons:** That is before we even start on the condition of the existing buildings. I will give way to Mr Dickson on that point.

**Mr Dickson:** This will be a very brief intervention. I wholly appreciate and thank Mr Lyons for securing the debate.

On Carrickfergus Academy, in particular, it is not only a split site but the two sites are on opposite sides of the town. Staff not only travel between the two schools, which sounds very easy, but taxi between the two schools to meet the teaching timetable. That situation is untenable.

**Mr Lyons:** The Member is absolutely right. If you consider a teacher sitting in his or her classroom, what would normally happen in most of our schools is that a class would go out and another one would come in. What happens in Carrickfergus Academy is that teachers finish their classes, get packed up, walk out to their cars, get into their cars, drive across the town, park their cars, get out of their cars, taxis or whatever and then walk to class. A huge amount of time is wasted doing that, and, as one of the teachers said to me recently, there is no time at the end of class to stop to talk to those pupils who may have a pastoral issue or need a little bit more support.

I am glad that there is a recognition of the issue and that extra funding is given to schools that are on split sites. However, certainly last year, the available funding did not even cover a quarter of the extra costs that were incurred by Carrickfergus Academy because of its operation on the split site.

I am also glad that the Department of Education's protocol for the selection of capital works programmes gives extra points in its scoring mechanism to schools that are part of a development proposal (DP) and have had to rationalise or that are on split sites. However, that needs to be greater. Such is the impact on the education of and outcomes for our young people and the additional burden that is placed on teachers and the senior management teams in those schools that a reasonable case could be made for giving additional weight to schools such as Carrickfergus Academy that have had to wait for so long. It is also important to put it on the record that it was promised that priority would be given to Carrickfergus Academy if Carrickfergus College and Downshire Community School merged. That has not been the case, and I fear that Mr Stewart is absolutely right and that pupils who are at that school will experience the split site for the rest of their time there. I would appreciate the Minister looking at the funding mechanism when schools operate on split sites and the scoring mechanism for the capital works programme.

It is not only about rationalisation. When schools are forced to close, such as Carnalbanagh Primary School on the edge of my constituency, can we please make sure that there are spaces available in nearby schools? Many pupils from Carnalbanagh would like to go to somewhere such as Hazelbank, which is only a few miles down the road, but there is no space there. It is already overcrowded, and I made those points when the announcement was made that Carnalbanagh was to close.

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyons:** I will give way.

**Mr Weir:** Carnalbanagh falls directly outside East Antrim, but it has a draw from East Antrim. When the development proposal was signed off, it was done on the specific condition that additional transport and space would be made available if required. That instruction was given as part of the conditions of the DP to the Education Authority, so, if there is an issue there, I am happy to contact the Member about it. As I said, however, that was part of the sign-off. It was put down in writing as part of the development proposal decision.

**Mr Lyons:** I appreciate that intervention from the Minister. It is very important. Yes, you can make transport available, but, from a place such as Carnalbanagh, which is still in East Antrim, it can be a long journey at certain times of the year, particularly to Larne or Glenarm. Hazelbank is nearby, however, and if the decision goes ahead to close Carnalbanagh Primary School, I am glad that the Minister has given that commitment again today that children can go to a school that is as close as possible to them.

As well as closure and rationalisation, there are issues for the school estate more generally. Simply put, improvements are needed. Some schools will need new builds, while some will need enhancement programmes. We will hear about many different schools in this debate,

but I will mention a couple that I have been able to visit recently. The first is Larne High School, which is a fantastic school. It is really doing its best by its children and providing opportunities for the young people who go there. It has seen greatly improved results and is really innovative in what it does, but, unfortunately, significant improvements are needed. It has a very high maintenance budget, so we need to look at the existing problems and make sure that we allocate the funding to where it needs to go so that we are not just racking up bills for years to come on maintenance but, rather, are spending the money smarter and sooner.

Capital expenditure is required, and I know that the Minister visited the school and was able to see that for himself. Spend needs to reflect the protocol that is in place. It needs to reflect where the need is, so I ask the Minister to look at that again. If it is the case that more funding is needed, we need to provide that funding, and I urge the Minister to lobby and bid for more funding for places such as Larne High School and Greenisland Primary School, where resource is much needed so that it can provide a quality education for our young people.

Why is that so important? There are a number of reasons. First, it is about equality. Why should some pupils get the opportunity to be taught in a state-of-the-art facility when others are in decent, adequate or inadequate accommodation. Let us make sure that all our children feel that they are getting the same treatment. Secondly, we want our children and young people to aspire to more and to better. We want our young people to be inspired by their surroundings. If we do not have the facilities in place and if our young people do not have confidence in the buildings in which they are being taught, how can we expect them to take pride in their work?

I am coming to the end of my time, but I want to raise one other issue, which is sports infrastructure. In many of our schools, especially our secondary schools, we do not have the facilities that are required. We have a great sporting history and tradition in East Antrim. We have much to be proud of, but we want to develop it. In some of our schools, we have gravel hockey pitches that are no longer fit for purpose. We have football pitches that have become waterlogged and unusable. We have some tennis courts that have had to be condemned, because they are no longer safe to use.

We want to encourage people to take part in sport, fitness and physical activity. That requires those facilities to be in place. I urge the Minister to look at funding specifically for much-needed sports facilities. I also ask him to work with colleagues to see how sports facilities in our schools could be used by the wider community. All too often, sports clubs come to me because we have a shortage of pitches and training areas in East Antrim, certainly in Larne and Carrickfergus. It is important that, where schools have those available, they share them with the local community. A lot of the time, they come up against insurance issues or problems with the Education Authority (EA). Our schools are a fantastic resource that could be used outside of school hours as well. I urge the Minister to look at that.

I thank the Business Committee for allocating the time for this Adjournment topic. I hope that we will hear more from other Members about the great need that we have in East Antrim. I know that the Minister will get that from all constituencies, but some of the accommodation that we

have is completely unacceptable. I ask the Minister to look at this favourably. If he is inclined to get his chequebook out, I have no doubt that we will find many projects that could use those funds.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** It is my intention to call first constituency Members, who will be allocated seven minutes each. All other Members will be allocated five minutes each. That is in order to facilitate a 10-minute response from the Minister, should he wish to offer one.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank Gordon Lyons for bringing forward this Adjournment topic. It is right that the difficulties that exist in the school estate in East Antrim are aired. I hope that they will be addressed subsequently.

Young people in East Antrim over the years have not benefited to the same extent as other constituencies have in terms of the funding of new educational premises. I am not entirely sure why. Over the past 20 years, there have been repeated announcements of new builds, but very few have been in East Antrim. It may be the fact that the constituency has an older, settled community and has not expanded to the extent of requiring a new build. Clearly, however, there has been a dearth of investment, and there is a need to correct that. Perhaps the Minister will allude to what might come in the future. I hope that he, having viewed the condition of some of our schools, recognises that there is a need to ensure that there is suitable accommodation in which our teachers and young people are able to thrive and reach their full potential.

I pay tribute to the teaching staff and other support staff in our schools for their work over the past year and a little bit longer. It has been a challenging time for everyone. They have had to learn new skills to continue to support young people through remote learning and adapt to new technology. They have done their best to try to support young people. I, like most people who are associated with schools in East Antrim, am really pleased that we have been able to return to more normal school activity. I hope that we will be able to maintain that and keep on top of the dreadful pandemic that we have faced.

As I said, we have had a lack of investment over the years. Many of the school buildings are really quite tired and no longer fit for purpose. The standard specification in terms of space in a classroom, lighting levels and lots of things no longer applies. Yet many of our schools have an excellent reputation. There is demand for the schools. I think of Greenisland Primary School and Whiteabbey Primary School. Those are older premises, but there is still huge demand for those schools because of the quality of the teaching that occurs. However, if we are to give the teachers the full tools and the young people the full benefits and opportunities, we should provide the right facilities for them.

Mr Lyons mentioned Islandmagee Primary School. It really has been a saga. It was in 2003 that the then three schools agreed to amalgamate. In 2007, the site was bought on the Low Road, and then it sat for years and years with changes in policies. I am pleased that that has now progressed through planning. I would be interested if the Minister could update us on the tendering for the actual building, when we can expect the foundations to be laid, when we can expect completion and when the community can expect to have a facility for which they have yearned for so long.

#### 4.45 pm

The remaining two schools in Islandmagee, Kilcoan and Mullaghdubh, are operating on split sites. Again, that causes problems for teaching. It causes problems for families, picking up perhaps two young people of different ages having dropped them off in the morning. It causes complications.

As was alluded to, in the post-primary sector, there are extra costs associated with this. It is vital that, if the Department is encouraging school amalgamation, it ensures that the budget is appropriate and that young people and teachers are not caught out and suffer as a result. The budget should be appropriate to operate in such conditions. It is not only that. Significant priority should be given to schools that agree to amalgamate.

Turning to Carrickfergus College, which is operating on that split-site scenario, there are significant time factors resulting from teachers and staff having to work across two sites. That is costing the public money. It is costing the school funds as well. It is not good management. We have made the point previously to the Minister that the funding arrangements should, again, be reflecting the priorities in the area plan and good value for money in how public funding is spent. I am concerned that, whilst we have not yet had an announcement of our new build to allow all those children to amalgamate in a new build on one of their sites, we are wasting money and failing our young people. I urge the Minister to ensure that that issue is progressed.

Equally, Larne High School is no longer adequate. There has been great success there, with pupil numbers increasing in the last few years from 430 to over 700. The school is not fit for purpose. My dad actually started working at Larne High School in 1957, and some of the premises are still being used. Facilities from 1957 are still being used, perhaps with a lick of paint and that is about the height of it. It is no longer fit for purpose.

I have to say that there is a question of equality. I am very happy that Ulidia has had an announcement of a new build, but its school was built 20 years ago — was it 20 years ago? — and significant parts are being knocked down. We are knocking down a 20-year-old school, yet we are forcing others to continue to use 70-year-old premises. I urge the Minister to ensure that there is appropriate funding and an equality of funding so that all our young people can reach their full potential.

**Mr Dickson:** I appreciate Mr Lyons bringing this debate; it is an important one.

First of all, I associate myself with his opening remarks with regards to our colleague David Hilditch, and I wish David very well in the treatment that he is going to have. David and I go back many years on Carrickfergus Borough Council, and I count him as a good friend.

Like all the Members in the Chamber today, I have been in touch with many of the schools across the constituency. To be truthful, we all have and will continue to express very serious concerns about the dilapidated state of many of our schools. Simply, it is not an acceptable situation. Pupils in East Antrim deserve much better from the Department, from the Executive and from the Assembly.

Just two weeks ago, like others, I was invited to visit Larne High School. I am highly impressed by the work that goes on in that school, but it happens in conditions

that are literally unacceptable and, in many cases, may be described as Third World. Today, I posted photographs of the school on my website so that the Department and the public can see the circumstances and facilities in which the principal and staff have to work and teach. It is a building that goes back to the 1950s. There is damp and water damage across the school building, as well as missing parts of ceilings, leaks, missing floor tiles, electric sockets that cannot be used because water pours into them, a gymnasium that is not fit for purpose and changing facilities that have to be shared by both sexes because the male changing rooms were closed a number of years ago as they were not fit for purpose.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Dickson:** I will.

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Member agree that, with sport being an important aspect of the school's curriculum, particularly in its sixth form development and links with Larne Football Club, it is scandalous that there are not adequate changing places there for the important work that it is carrying out?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you. I totally agree with Mr Beggs's comment. For example, it is great to see a new 3G pitch being built at the school, but how do you get changed to use those facilities and how do you shower afterwards? That is part of the problem and the conundrum.

We need to value our children and their education and provide a great deal more for them. It is not just secondary schools. For a number of years, I have been working with the Education Authority and the Department to address the unacceptable state, which Members have recognised, of Greenisland Primary School. I have visited the school on a number of occasions — in fact, it is the school that I started my education in — and its list of problems is endless and very similar to Larne High School: damp classrooms, inadequate toilet facilities and a severe lack of daylight. It was a school that was built for 200 pupils but today has over 400. There is no space for a library or for parking, and it is wholly inadequate for the traffic mayhem in the mornings around the school. I am hopeful that things will move forward for Greenisland Primary School following the allocation of school enhancement programme funding. However, I hope that the Minister will confirm that the Department will endeavour to move those projects along at speed and get the school up to a standard quickly.

In addition, reference has been made to Whiteabbey Primary School, which is of the same vintage and has broadly similar problems. Monkstown Community School and Newtownabbey Community High School had the promise of a new school building when they merged, but nothing has materialised there either.

Moving to the other end of East Antrim, St Killian's College in Larne is in a beautiful historical building that is no longer fit for purpose and, again, is crying out for a new building. It is facing many of the same problems, but one of the major problems that it faces is access to the internet: it has to rely on a microwave link. Let us hope that Project Stratum will at least help in that respect.

I would be grateful if the Minister could advise how he is working with the schools across East Antrim to develop the school sites and school buildings and ensure that they

have 21st century facilities like high-speed broadband. I also note my concern at the very slow pace of the building in Islandmagee, which Members have made reference to. Again, I have been involved in a number of the meetings on that. I am pleased that the matter is progressing to seek planning permission, but we need to know when it will move beyond that point to the actual contract to build. People have been waiting some 10 years for that.

We should also look to some of the successes in East Antrim. For example, the wonderful new build at Corran Integrated Primary School provides a modern and spacious school environment for the children who attend it. I hope that that success can be replicated in many more schools in the school estate across East Antrim.

We have to invest in our school estate. Children, teachers and staff deserve much better than what has been provided. It is a great credit to the staff and the pupils who work and are educated in those buildings in East Antrim. While the credit goes to them, the poor marks have to go to the Department of Education for the way in which it looks after its estate. I encourage the Minister to grasp the problem for the school estate across East Antrim, work with school principals and school boards of governors and help us deliver the education facilities that our young people deserve going into this century.

**Mr Stewart:** I echo the comments about our colleague David Hilditch. It is hard to believe that it is 10 years since I was elected to Carrickfergus Borough Council: I enjoyed serving with him there and I have enjoyed serving with him here. We all wish him well in his recovery.

I thank Mr Lyons for securing this topic for the adjournment debate. I think that this is my first adjournment debate in the House since we came back, so it is quite novel to take part in it. However, it is on such an important topic.

Our pupils and parents in Carrickfergus and Larne and across East Antrim are spoilt with the quality of education that is provided by our amazing schools, our teachers and our principals. That is without doubt. When anyone comes to me saying that they have been turned down for their first choice, I have no hesitation referring them to another school in the area because I know that the quality of education is fantastic. However, it always falls down with the infrastructure and the quality of the facilities that are provided. We could wax lyrical today about the list of issues in many schools in East Antrim. I know that the situation is the same across the entire school estate in Northern Ireland and that money does not grow on trees, but we are here to discuss schools in East Antrim, and it would be remiss of us not to bang the drum on their behalf.

This has been a hugely difficult year. I am a governor on the boards of two schools, Silverstream Primary School and Nursery Unit, and Woodlawn Primary School, and I am also a trustee of Carrickfergus Model Primary School. When I drop my son off there every day or when I visit as a governor, I know about the staff's workload, their passion and the difficult circumstances that they have operated in over the last year. However, that has not deterred them one bit, and they have cracked on and got the job done. The pupils are smiling, even though things are not easy and it has been a difficult year. My hat goes off to each and every one of them for the amazing work that they have done.



We have proved that we have been able to work together as MLAs. Mr Lyons referred to a number of examples of that. I can think of a letter that I put together, which was sent to the then permanent secretary, Derek Baker, on behalf of all our colleagues in East Antrim, about the delays at Islandmagee Primary School. The discussion on that has been well rehearsed, but, for the record, I will make the point again that I was speaking to a former pupil who is about to finish a master's and was in primary 1 when that amalgamation happened. It is hard to believe that the school has had to wait for 20-odd years. The kids of the pupils from that time are about to start school, and it is still not complete. We take our hat off to Arlene Cambridge and all the staff at Islandmagee Primary School for their tenacity. It will come about eventually, and we look forward to the first brick being laid and to the school being complete. It is very frustrating that that has not happened yet and that so much time has gone by.

When you compare that with other sites where things have gone quite quickly, you find that there is often no excuse for things not happening. To go back to my original point about Carrickfergus Academy, I fear that that is where we could end up. The whole idea of that amalgamation was predicated on the notion that it would be prioritised for a new build. When the vote on it took place, the governors and the parents were carried on the momentum that there would be a new school very quickly.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Stewart:** Of course. Always.

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Member agree that, unless the Minister and the Department prioritise such amalgamations appropriately, very few schools will come forward to seek an amalgamation in future?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Stewart:** Thank you for that. Absolutely. Given the way that things are going, maybe because there is a changing strategy for education and the prioritisation of sites, more schools will be asked to look at mergers. They will certainly think twice if the experience of Carrickfergus Academy and the schools that formed it is anything to go by. I fear that there are pupils in that school, now in year 8, who will not see that site. If the experience of Islandmagee Primary School is anything to go by, their kids may not see the site.

It costs money, teaching hours and logistics. The entire weight of effort to transfer between those two schools — it is two and a half miles — means that hundreds of teaching hours are lost every single year. What is the result if you multiply that by what could be 10 or 12 years or however long they have to wait? The uncertainty of it all has an impact. We should at least know where the site is, but that has not even been confirmed yet. There has been a nudge and a wink that it will remain where it is, but that has not even been confirmed.

Because of that, Carrickfergus Grammar School, which I left in 2000, is still waiting for new sports facilities, as Mr Lyons mentioned. We do not know whether we can invest in the site itself broadly enough to share across two school sites because we do not know whether, in the long term, the new school at Carrickfergus Academy is going to be there. Even getting certainty that it will be located there

would mean that we could start to build the infrastructure around it so that shared facilities at least could be developed while we wait for the new build. With every piece of strength that I have, I urge that we at least try to give certainty as quickly as possible to the pupils, parents and staff at Carrickfergus Academy.

I referred to other schemes that have gone well. The rebuild at Corran Integrated Primary School and Nursery in Larne was announced in 2013 and has long since been built. It is up and running, and hats off again to the staff there. However, the focus goes back to the other schools that are still waiting. There is a disparity that I can never get my head around.

#### 5.00 pm

Aside from those two schemes, there have been other projects in recent years. Woodburn Primary School has been a roaring success and a really good asset, and its numbers are up because of that. When I visited recently, all the pupils and staff were overjoyed by the standard of their new building, so we thank the Minister for getting that completed. The same applies to Acorn Integrated Primary School.

I have some concerns. Recently, the Antiville Primary School and St Comgall's College sites were sold off. Local taxpayers had put money into those schools. In future, when schools are closed and the land sold off, it would be nice if that money could be reinvested in the local school estate. In that case, it went to building houses. Maybe that could be looked at. I do not know whether that is pie in the sky thinking.

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Stewart:** Yes.

**Mr Weir:** I do not have details of the individual sites. However, when any public land is sold off, there will be some restriction on where the money goes. It will depend on whether direct money has been provided for the site in the first place. Generally speaking, the money from sales goes back to public finances and the Treasury. The Member makes a reasonable point. Unfortunately, however, the money cannot be ring-fenced for reallocation within the Department of Education. My job would be a lot easier if it could.

**Mr Stewart:** Maybe we can look at that collectively. I do not know whether that can be done. As I said, maybe it is pie in the sky, but it was just a thought.

In my last minute, I want to comment on a couple of points. A number of rural schools have been added to the latest round of area planning, which, in my opinion, is a euphemism for earmarked for closure. It would not be right to mention particular schools. Those governors and staff are working tirelessly, and they fear becoming victims of death by a thousand cuts, Minister. It is really sad to see that. They provide a vital service in the rural community and should be given every opportunity to continue doing that. They should, at least, be kept informed, rather than having this year-on-year uncertainty.

Finally, in my last 30 seconds, if you will indulge me, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I have a real fear about the loss of our traffic patrolmen and women. There have never been more cars on the roads, yet every school is being told that, if their patrol person retires or, sadly, passes

away, they will not be replaced. We had that at the Model Primary School with the tragic death of its patrol person last year.

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Stewart:** Of course, yes.

**Mr Dickson:** I want to comment on that particular issue with the Model Primary School. When travelling to my constituency office in Carrick, I strictly observe the 20 mph signs that are there to replace the patrol person, but I am constantly passed by other cars every time I make that journey.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am afraid that the Alliance Party has stolen your last 10 seconds, Mr Stewart. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank Gordon Lyons for securing the debate. I echo the comments from others in praising the school staff across the constituency of East Antrim for their work and commitment every year, but particularly this year. East Antrim is not my constituency, of course, but it neighbours my constituency of North Antrim. A small number of pupils in parts in the glens of Antrim, for example, attend schools in East Antrim. Therefore, I have a few issues pertaining to the debate that I want to put on record.

St Killian's College, on the coast road, is on one of the most picturesque and beautiful sites anywhere on this island. However, it has a building meant for 600 pupils and a current enrolment of 850. When my party colleague John O'Dowd announced and committed to a new school building in 2014, no one expected that, by 2021, no sod had yet been dug. I echo and agree with all the commentary from other Members on other schools. St Killian's is in stage 3 of planning with Mid and East Antrim Council and, hopefully, is on track for Christmas 2022. However, more than a whole school generation of pupils has missed out on a modern school environment because of bureaucracy and delay in the process. In a similar situation in another school in my constituency, I recall a member of the board of governors describing the process as trying to wade through treacle. Minister, that needs to be streamlined. We need to ensure the speedier delivery of new school buildings when they are announced.

Parts of East Antrim are particularly rural, and, whilst this is not an issue specific to schools, planning constraints and infrastructure deficits in parts of the glens of Antrim are having a major impact on our rural school estate, and I echo the commentary from John Stewart on rural schools.

Given the issues with planning and infrastructure in places like Cushendun, Cushendall, Glenariff etc, young people have to build away from where they were brought up or buy outside the community in which they were reared, and that has an impact on primary school enrolment in those places. While that is not the direct responsibility of the Minister, he needs to help to address that with his Executive colleagues.

School transport in the constituency is another issue that has been flagged up to me, particularly for children attending special educational needs schools in Ballymena and Larne. Some of those children are being picked up as early as 8.00 am and are not getting to school until after 9.00 am, and they are not getting home until after 4.30 pm. Some are spending as much as three hours travelling to

and from school, perhaps because they are being taken, as it has been described to me, on a tour of East Antrim rather than via the most direct route. Again, Minister, that needs to be reviewed to ensure that those children spend less time travelling and more time at school and at home.

This is a general point about all schools, which has been raised by Gordon Lyons and others. I spoke earlier about St Killian's new build. New builds need to take account of more than just the educational needs of our school community, given the lack of sporting and other facilities, particularly in rural parts of the constituency. The Department needs to make provisions to allow schools to have excellent sporting facilities and to open up those facilities to the general public. Communities in rural areas should be able to access, after 5.00 pm, at the weekend and during the two months over the summer, good sporting and other facilities that are on their doorstep. For example, why not incorporate state-of-the-art facilities in St Killian's and allow the numerous GAA, soccer, rugby, rowing and athletic clubs in the constituency to use them? Those are just a number of things that I would like to see.

**Mr Stewart:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGuigan:** Yes.

**Mr Stewart:** I am chancing my arm because I think that you are about to finish. I will use 30 seconds of your time to get in a point that I was going to make earlier, so please indulge me. Does the Member agree that the plan by the EA not to replace traffic patrol people outside our schools, particularly those with dual carriageways outside them and even those in rural communities, is dangerous and is not in the interests of pupil safety? We have to be rightly obsessed with pupil safety inside and outside school. Given that there are more cars on the roads now than ever before, surely now is the time to invest in safety in getting to school as well as safety inside it.

**Mr McGuigan:** I congratulate the Member on his use of that intervention. I wholeheartedly agree. We should be passionate about making travel to school safe for our children. I agree with the point about school patrols. I also agree that that is outside this Minister's remit, but there should be a 20 mph limit outside schools. We need to work to ensure that there is active travel provision so that our children can walk and cycle safely to school. I totally agree with what the Member said.

**Mr Lyons:** I thank the Member for giving way. On Mr Stewart's point, it does not help in other ways either. For example, if parents know that a patrol person is there to help the children get safely across a road, that may encourage them not to drive to school. I know that a number of schools, including Linn Primary School, Greenisland Primary School and Whiteabbey Primary School, face problems with traffic, as do the residents. That is a big issue, and it should be taken into consideration before planning approval is given, because it can cause a real hassle for residents. Corran Integrated Primary School got that right with the parking on its site.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Just as Alliance stole the Ulster Unionists' last 10 seconds, the DUP has now stolen Sinn Féin's last 10 seconds. I now move on to the next Member on my list, and that is Daniel McCrossan.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank Member Lyons for securing the debate. I am all for such debates, particularly when it

comes to putting a very bright spotlight on the school estate, its dilapidated condition in many parts of Northern Ireland and safety issues inside and outside schools. Various constituents right across Northern Ireland have shared with me, as the SDLP's education spokesperson, many stories that are truly shocking and definitely question the safety at some of the schools and the condition of some of the estates.

I do find it quite strange, however, that a Member who is in the same party as the Minister has to bring an Adjournment debate to highlight those issues. Perhaps the best thing to do is to have a conversation directly with the Minister to resolve the issues in your constituency, because I can tell you that they are not unique to East Antrim. The condition of the school estate right across the entirety of Northern Ireland is in question, and, although it is easy for all of us to point the finger at the Education Authority, the buck certainly stops with the Department of Education and the Minister, and not just Minister Weir, who has been in office for just over a year since the three-year collapse of the institutions, but consecutive Education Ministers, who have failed to grasp the nettle and resolve the issues with the school estate.

That having been said, I am not a Member for East Antrim, as Members will know, but all the issues that have been shared by Members today are reflected in schools by school leaders, principals and parents right across the entirety of Northern Ireland. I have done a fair bit of research on some of the issues, and I have looked at some correspondence from principals in East Antrim. I share Member Lyons's disappointment at the lack of commitment and willingness from the Education Authority to invest in Carrickfergus Grammar School and the disappointment of Members across the Chamber who echo his concerns. The Minister is best placed to resolve those issues and could very quickly, with a phone call or the stroke of a pen, add pressure to ensure that the steam is taken out of the delays.

Some of us might blame the Minister, and some would say that I continually blame the Minister. I understand, however, that, politically, it is a big issue. It is an issue in all our constituencies that needs to be resolved, and it is one that has been going on for many decades. I have written to the Minister in recent times about similar issues that exist in the school estate in West Tyrone and in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The Minister will know that St Conor's Primary School in the heart of Omagh is suffering similarly. The school was built many years ago and accommodates 400 young people and many teachers. As Mr Dickson and Mr Stewart outlined, the issue lies outside the school estate. The higher volume of vehicles on the roads brings into question the safety of our children and young people. Similar to Carrickfergus Grammar, there is a very serious issue with traffic management at schools such as St Conor's in my constituency, where the main road, which is surrounded by hundreds of housing estates and residents, sees a logjam every single day. Children are coming straight out of the school gate to go to their parents' cars or to buses or taxis and are running in between and behind cars, putting themselves at risk. The issue is that there is so much congestion that it is threatening the lives and safety of those young people.

Members have highlighted Larne High School, which was built in 1957. Member Beggs said that it needs work, as it

is 64 years old. In West Tyrone, Strabane Primary School is another example. It is 50 years old and has been waiting for a major refurbishment since 2004. I declare an interest, because my former primary school —.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Order. Let me bring the Member to order briefly. His contribution to the debate on schools in East Antrim has been tangential to say the least. This is an Adjournment debate on the school estate in East Antrim. I am sure that, if the Member wanted to at some point in the future, we could have a similar debate on West Tyrone, but can we try to return to the theme of the Adjournment debate?

**Mr McCrossan:** Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with respect, the theme of the debate is the school estate, and that is not unique to that specific constituency.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Order. The title in the Order Paper is "School Estate in East Antrim". The Member is veering dangerously close to questioning a ruling of the Chair, and I am sure that that is not his intention.

**Mr McCrossan:** As I stated previously when mentioning Larne High School and Carrickfergus Grammar School in the context of the school estate, I am all for debates about the condition of the school estate in East Antrim, but, equally, Adjournment debates by themselves do not solve the issues.

Fluffy conversation around the issues will not resolve the school estate problems in East Antrim; what will resolve them is swift action by the Minister of Education. Less debate, more action, more money, more investment in the school estate and swift leadership are absolutely necessary to ensure that our children in East Antrim and every other constituency have the best possible access to high-quality provision.

#### 5.15 pm

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am afraid that the Member's time is up. I call the Minister of Education to respond to the comments that have been made.

**Mr Weir:** First, I associate myself with the remarks of Members who sent their best wishes to my colleague and friend David Hilditch for his treatment.

I am delighted to respond on this Adjournment topic. I am sure that Members will forgive me if I keep my remarks on the school estate to East Antrim. Road infrastructure, traffic management and safety on our roads may lie outside the scope. If only there were some other Minister from a different party who could answer on those issues. One assumes that there will be a quiet word rather than a debate on the subject.

I appreciate a lot of the frustrations and concerns. In the 10 minutes that I have, I hope to deal with as many as possible of the issues that have been raised directly by Members. If, however, particularly in relation to individual schools that have been mentioned, I inadvertently omit a school or do not have the time to complete a response, I will endeavour to write to Members with the specifics.

Members will be aware that the broader school estate, including special schools in the system, comprises about 1,100 schools. Part of the frustration comes from the sense that the budget for capital expenditure could, if the

money were there, be spent three or four times over. That has resulted in a range of schools not being in the best possible condition.

Area planning was mentioned. I do not intend to touch too directly on that because, while we are moving to a longer-term cycle for area planning, specific decisions on individual schools are a legal process to which I have to directly respond and on which I am forbidden from commenting.

Mr McGuigan commented on special needs transport. While it does not cut down the travel time, the EA has recently launched a series of new buses with a much greater level of comfort and safety for children, with a particular focus on special needs schools. Tomorrow, I will visit Roddensvale special school in Larne. It will be interesting to see whether those transport issues are raised.

The school estate in East Antrim comprises 52 schools, with 14,000 pupils being educated in them. Under the major capital programme initiated in 2012, work on five schools in East Antrim was announced. While mention was made of the slightly quicker progress at Ulidia, that work was announced under the Fresh Start programme, which has enabled the money to be levered in directly. Of the other school projects, two — Woodburn Primary and Corran Integrated — with an investment totalling £8.7 million, are complete.

Every school would like a new build, of course, but sometimes that is not possible. The other device that has principally been used is the school enhancement programme (SEP), which enables investment of up to £4 million. Four SEP programmes have been announced for East Antrim: Roddensvale, as I mentioned, Carrick Grammar, Thornfield House and Greenisland Primary. I will come to Carrick and Greenisland in greater detail later. Two SEP programmes have been completed in recent years at Acorn Integrated, which was mentioned, and Belfast High, with total investment in the region of £5 million.

In the past three financial years, over £6 million from the minor works programme has been invested across schools in East Antrim. From the broader perspective, it is, obviously, the responsibility of the managing authorities to plan sustainable provision and, as I will touch on, to be the gateway for building applications.

I turn to some of the individual schools that have been mentioned. Islandmagee Primary School and Carrickfergus Academy share the particular pressures of being split-site schools. I was recently at Carrickfergus Academy, and I will look to see whether there is any scope for additional funding to be looked at for split-site schools. That will impact on a limited number of sites across Northern Ireland, but any adjustment to the common funding formula by way of additional money for split sites will mean, effectively, a different division of money. Any money going to one school will always have a knock-on effect on others.

There has been frustration at Islandmagee. The business case was approved in July 2019 and identified a new-build school on the Low Road. I can update Members that the design of the new build progresses well and that stage 4, which is the technical design report, was submitted by the integrated consultant team for approval by the Department

on 17 May 2021. Members will be aware that the planning application for the project has been lodged with the council. We hope that it progresses.

As for Carrickfergus Academy, in the last capital call prior to devolution, mention was made of incentivising amalgamations. One of the problems, to some extent, was that nearly all the schools that went forward at that stage and were approved in that capital call were amalgamations. Carrickfergus Academy fell just a little bit below the radar in numbers. However, it is the intention for there to be a fresh capital call later in 2021. That will be scored independently by officials, but Carrickfergus Academy is well placed for it. Strong consideration will be given in the scoring. I cannot make any direct promises in relation to that; in the past, sometimes, too many promises have been made.

**Mr Lyons:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he confirm whether he thinks that there will be changes to the protocol, the scoring mechanism?

In response to Mr McCrossan's point, I say that I am glad that he was able to visit many schools in East Antrim. Mr McCrossan, whose default position seems to be outrage right now, can be assured that I raise these issues not only with the Minister but on the Floor, which is appropriate.

**Mr Weir:** I am glad that one Member is raising the issue of the protocol without it causing quite the level of controversy that it does in other subjects. *[Laughter.]* We will examine the protocol to make sure that it is fit for purpose. At times, not enough credit is given to the state of the school buildings. I assure Members that I believe that it is critical that there is a high level of scoring for split sites. As Members have pointed out, there is an inequity, and it raises the pressures that are there.

I have been to Larne High School, and I am aware of the very good work that is going on. One of the important things to note is that, in any process for capital build, be it SEP or major works, the managing authority will put forward a range of schools to be considered. The Education Authority did not put forward Larne High School in either the latest school enhancement programme call or the latest major capital works programme. Therefore, it did not even make the starting gate for consideration. That is why, I think, there needs to be continued engagement.

Greenisland Primary School has been announced in the SEP. It is at an early stage. An initial site visit has been undertaken by the EA, and procurement of a design team for the project is well-advanced. Once a design team is appointed, formal steering group meetings will take place, and that will allow the school to make an impact directly.

Good work has gone on with the sports pitches at Carrickfergus Grammar School. I know that there has been the situation in the SEP. I visited with the mayor, and there has been good work between the council and Carrickfergus Grammar School. That should be advanced.

An application was submitted for Whiteabbey Primary School, but it did not get a green light for a full announcement. However, some work has been provided for in minor works. Those projects are expected to go to tender over the next week or two.

St Killian's College was mentioned. It was announced under a major works programme in June 2014.

The business case was approved by the Department with a total capital value of £32.9 million. The current position is that the developed design stage 3 submission is being reviewed by the Department's technical advisers. Therefore, there is a level of movement there.

Abbey Community College —.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Minister, this debate is scheduled to end at 26 minutes past the hour. Therefore, you have an additional minute, if you want to take it.

**Mr Weir:** If I had known that earlier, I could have spun this out a little bit better.

Mention was made of the Abbey Community College project as well. It was announced in 2014. The integrated consultant team has been appointed and a feasibility study completed. It identified a number of feasible options to provide accommodation for the college. A business case is being developed by the Education Authority to determine the preferred option to be taken forward.

The valid point was made that we need to look at how the process can move more quickly. Balanced against that is a need to ensure value for public money, particularly with major capital works, and that creates a need for a level of checks. As part of that, with any new build, there is a requirement to look widely for any potential venues, which means that any capital build, by its nature, will tend to be a lot more elongated than, for example, the school enhancement programme.

I thank the Members for their contributions today. I will continue to work with schools in East Antrim and beyond, because every student deserves the best possible facilities for their education.

*Adjourned at 5.26 pm.*



# Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.





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# Written Ministerial Statements

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## Department of Health

### Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation Announcement on the Astra Zeneca Vaccine

*Published at 5.00 pm on 7 May 2021.*

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** Vaccines continue to save lives in Northern Ireland and to protect people from serious illness. The Astra Zeneca vaccine continues to be essential in the successful roll-out of our vaccination programme. Thanks to this programme, close to a million people here have already received their first vaccine dose, helping society to emerge carefully from lockdown.

Following the latest advice from the JCVI (Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation), my Department has today issued an update on the Northern Ireland vaccination programme.

People aged under 40 will be able to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech through the regional Trust vaccination centres.

People of all ages who have had a first dose of Astra Zeneca should proceed with their second dose of this same vaccine. As Members will know getting the second vaccine dose is very important because it further increases the level of protection against COVID-19.

Those aged under 40 can still make an informed choice to receive the Astra Zeneca vaccine, for instance where no alternative vaccine is available, or where someone has an appointment booked for vaccination in the coming days and may prefer not to reschedule to receive an alternative vaccine.

The JCVI's updated advice relates to reports of extremely rare adverse events of concurrent thrombosis (blood clots) and thrombocytopenia (low platelet count) following vaccination with the first dose of AstraZeneca vaccine. The JCVI has made clear there have been no safety concerns identified for thrombosis/thrombocytopenia associated with the second dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

The JCVI has updated its risk/benefit advice in relation to age groups, following a review of the current low incidence of disease and current and projected availability of alternative vaccines. In light of these factors, Pfizer is now its recommended vaccine for under 40's.

The chances of a younger person becoming seriously ill with COVID-19 get smaller as infection rates increasingly come under control in the UK. That's altered the risk benefit balance for under 40's.

The change means some logistical alterations to Northern Ireland's vaccination programme. From Monday, May 10:

- People aged 40 plus can book Astra Zeneca first dose appointments at the SSE Arena vaccination centre and community pharmacies.
- People aged 30-39 can book their Pfizer first dose appointments at the other regional Trust vaccination centres across NI. These are Foyle Arena/ Omagh Leisure Centre/ Lakeland Forum/ South Lake Craigavon/ Seven Towers Ballymena/ RVH in Belfast.
- People aged 30-39 can choose to make an informed decision to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine from participating community pharmacies if that is what they prefer or if they decide they would rather not wait to receive an alternative to the AstraZeneca vaccine.
- Anyone aged under 40 already booked for their first vaccine at one of the Trust centres, including the SSE Arena, will have this appointment honoured – with the Pfizer vaccine.
- Anyone of any age who has received an Astra Zeneca first dose should proceed with their second dose of Astra Zeneca. That's unless they have had clinical advice not to do so.

My Department has today issued detailed Q&As in relation to this update: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/updated-ni-vaccination-programme-key-questions-answered>

It is undoubtedly the case that our vaccination programme is a huge and unprecedented undertaking. I want to again pay tribute to all those involved in delivering this programme. As we look forward to a better summer, with restrictions eased, we should all be very thankful for the vaccines. Their successful development and roll-out have made – and changed – history.

Logistical challenges are inevitable in any such undertaking, but the programme has already proved itself to be highly resilient.

Given the current supply schedules, the changes announced today will delay us to a limited degree in getting to the finish line of all adults being offered a first dose. I am advised that this delay will be a matter of weeks, rather than anything longer. Demand for vaccination remains very strong and I would again appeal to people still waiting for their jab to be patient. Their turn is coming.

I would urge Members to continue to do all they can to support the vaccination programme – and encourage take-up.

It is vitally important to reiterate that the potential risk associated with the AZ first dose is extremely rare and that

the threat from COVID-19 is much higher for the majority of adults.

We all need protection from Covid. It remains an extremely serious threat to individuals and society. We must always be mindful of the devastation it has inflicted in Northern Ireland and across the world. Vaccination is our best defence and give us hope for the future.

I can assure Members that every effort will continue to be made to deliver vaccines as quickly as possible across Northern Ireland.

## Department for Infrastructure

### **Announcement of Decision to Proceed with the Enniskillen Southern Bypass Scheme, The Release of the Departmental Statement, and the Making of the Necessary Statutory Orders**

*Published at 11.00 am on 11 May 2021.*

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** I wish to inform Members of my decision to release the Departmental Statement for the A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass Scheme and to proceed to progress the scheme in readiness of funding becoming available.

I am delighted to announce this key step in the development of this significant scheme, which is seeking to reduce traffic congestion for strategic and local road users within Enniskillen Town Centre. I am very aware of how important the A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass will be for the many people and businesses who have expressed their support for the scheme. I am committed to doing all that I can to deliver this scheme and will work with the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues to secure the necessary funding as quickly as possible.

The A4 at Enniskillen forms part of the South Western Key Transport Corridor which provides a strategic link between the east of the north, the Fermanagh Lakelands and cross border regions. Progressing a scheme of this scale represents significant investment in the region and provision of the bypass will greatly benefit both strategic and local road users by improving safety and journey time reliability. My announcement to proceed with the scheme addresses one of the proposals as outlined in the Regional Development Strategy document 2035, to improving a strategically important route within the Regional Transport Network.

I have been made aware of the difficulties faced by strategic and local motorists travelling through Enniskillen Town centre and welcome the positive outcome from the Statutory Consultation held in 2018 which did not require a Public Inquiry. Consultation will continue with key stakeholders particularly landowners affected by the scheme proposals to minimise any related impacts and I believe the scheme should be progressed as quickly as possible, subject to completing all the necessary statutory processes and securing the necessary funding.

Importantly and in parallel with this work, my Department will be exploring further opportunities to improve the town centre to create a sustainable, liveable place where people have the space to stay, meet, shop and safely walk, wheel and cycle. This will include opportunities for active and sustainable travel in the town.

Part V of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 sets out the statutory requirements for the assessment of the environmental impacts of major road schemes. Having caused the examination of the environmental information, which includes the Environment Impact Assessment Report (EIAR), the consultation responses to the EIAR, I am satisfied that the likely significant environmental effects of the proposed scheme have been assessed. This has provided me with the necessary information

which I consider reasonable and sufficient to allow me to make a reasoned conclusion on the significant effects of this project on the environment. My reasoned conclusion therefore is that the proposed scheme will not have any significant adverse impacts on the environment (including designated sites and protected species) that cannot be addressed by the mitigation and monitoring measures set out in the Departmental Statement. In deciding to proceed with this scheme, I am committing my Department to carrying out all the necessary actions to facilitate the mitigation and monitoring measures set out in the Departmental Statement.

My Department will now publish the formal "Environmental Impact Assessment: Notice to Proceed" and will make the Direction Order, the Vesting Order and the Bridge Orders for the scheme.

The Departmental Statement and associated documents are available for viewing at the Department's website; <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/road-improvements/a4-southern-enniskillen-bypass>

This is an important announcement and another step forward by my department in delivering on better connecting our communities and improving the lives of all of our citizens.

## Department of Justice

### HMICFRS Efficiency Inspection 2020-21

*Published on 17 May 2021.*

**Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice):** On 2 April 2021, I invited Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary (HMIC) to undertake the 2020-21 inspection of the efficiency and effectiveness of the PSNI, in line with the requirements of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998.

In commissioning this inspection, I took account of the request I had received from the Northern Ireland Policing Board for "a thematic inspection into the PSNI's handling of the funeral of Mr Bobby Storey – its operational decision making, application of the law in the context of the COVID-19 regulations, and review the PSNI's policy and procedures around police engagement with event organisers and others, and consistency of approach given the findings of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) statement of 30 March 2021".

Given this context, I asked that the inspection should:

- assess whether the approach taken by the PSNI to the events surrounding the funeral of Mr Bobby Storey was within the parameters of national policing standards, in the context of COVID-19 health protection regulations; and
- Offer relevant learning to assist in policing of COVID restrictions through the 'four Es' approach in coming months.

In light of the high level of public interest in the PSNI's handling of these events, I asked that the inspection should be completed by 14 May.

I have today received the report of this inspection from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), which has been published on their website, and I have placed a copy in the Assembly Library. I am grateful to HMIC and his team for their swift response to my request and for producing such a comprehensive report.

The report concluded that the PSNI prioritised public security over enforcement of COVID-19 regulations at the funeral, an approach HMICFRS said it understood given the likelihood of tensions and because the regulations were confusing. The report also confirmed that HMICFRS saw nothing to suggest that there was bias towards one community or another in the way the PSNI dealt with the funeral. The inspectorate did have some criticisms of how the PSNI engaged with the event organisers before, during and after the funeral but emphasised that since these were not especially serious failings, they did not justify individual officers being censured or called upon to resign.

There is not just learning in the report for the PSNI. It highlights again the need for the PSNI to be better supported by those with responsibility for public health regulations in interpreting changes to the law that could affect the policing of events.

Finally, the report highlights that all politicians and community leaders have a part to play in working with the police to build and maintain public confidence in policing, and that they should be mindful of the consequences, intended or otherwise, of their comments.

In the wake of the PPS statement, I called for political leadership that upholds the rule of law and which calms rather than inflames community tensions. I would again like to remind my Assembly and Executive colleagues that we have well-established and carefully calibrated arrangements in this jurisdiction for policing oversight and accountability. Today's report demonstrates the value of allowing those charged with overseeing how the PSNI operates to exercise that role, free from any political interference.

## Department of Finance

### 2021-22 May COVID-19 Funding

*Published at 5.30 pm on 20 May 2021.*

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** I wish to provide Members with an update on further allocations of COVID-19 support funding for the financial year 2021-22.

#### COVID Funding Available

Since the announcement of the Final Budget for 2021-22 further funding of £114 million has been made available in relation to COVID-19 Barnett consequentials by the Treasury.

Given the need to ensure that the COVID-19 response continues to be as responsive as possible the Executive has now made a further set of allocations.

#### COVID-19 Allocations

##### Current Restrictions

The extension of current restrictions into the 2021-22 financial year means there is a requirement to also extend the current support measures. The Localised Business Support Scheme is projecting a cost of £64 million for 2021-22, the Large Hospitality and Tourism Business Support Scheme is projecting a cost of £14.1 million and the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme is projecting a cost of £18 million. The total amount of funding required for these schemes is £96.1 million. Allocations in respect of these schemes is set out at Annex A.

##### Further Allocations

In total, departments submitted bids of £297.6 million Resource, and £30.4 million Capital in relation to this exercise. A full list of bids submitted is set out at Annex B.

The Executive has considered the position and allocations totalling £189.5 million Resource and £30.4 million Capital have been made. A full list is set out at Annex C.

##### DAERA

DAERA has been allocated £1.1 million Resource DEL including £0.5 million for the Rural Business Community Fund, which will bring together rural businesses and other partners to drive economic growth in rural areas.

##### DfC

£50.3 million is being allocated to the Department for Communities. This is to address a range of pressures including £10 million to Councils to ensure the continued delivery of local public services, as well as £3 million to support council-managed community development and advice services via the Community Support Programme.

The total also includes £13 million to Arts, Culture and Heritage to support ongoing recovery within the sector. Similarly, I am also recommending that £5 million is provided to the Sports Sustainability Fund to help alleviate the ongoing effects of the pandemic on sporting bodies, while an additional £5 million is being provided to support

charities and social enterprises facing continued financial difficulties.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on levels of unemployment. £12 million is therefore also being provided to allow the Department to progress its Restart scheme, which will support older people in returning to employment.

#### DfE

The Department for the Economy has been allocated £9 million for the Further Education sector to ensure safe learning for students.

#### DE

The allocation of £32.7 million to the Department of Education will meet all sixteen of its resource bids relating to this academic year. The Executive has also met the department's capital bid to provide laptops for teachers to support remote learning.

The Education Department also bid for a range of pressures for the next academic year and these can be revisited when there is more clarity on course of pandemic and the restrictions which will be required at that time.

#### DoF

£2.7 million has been allocated to the Department of Finance. This will help to alleviate the pressures resulting from lost income for Land Registry and Ordnance Survey as a result of COVID restrictions.

#### DoH

The £50.5 million resource allocation to Health includes provision to allow the Department to continue the roll out of the Covid 19 vaccination programme. £12m is being provided to help meet the additional costs faced within adult social care as a result of Covid. Funding is also being provided to meet a range of pressures across the Health Service as it continues to recover from the impact of the pandemic, including within Cancer services, Nursing and Midwifery, as well as Cardiology. The allocation includes £1.4 million to support a number of mental health interventions and a further £1 million towards managing the long term health effects of Covid on individuals. The Department has also been allocated £9 million Capital for COVID-19 initiatives.

#### DfI

The £20 million resource allocation to DfI is being provided to compensate the Department for lost income as result of Covid. It is for the Infrastructure Minister to prioritise this £20m between Translink, DVA and other bodies. It is early in the year so the impact on the income of DfI agencies will continue to be monitored and will be revisited.

#### DoJ

I am proposing an allocation of £20.7 million Resource DEL to the Department for Justice. This allocation will support the Police, Prisons and Court Service in meeting the additional costs faced as a result of Covid. It also includes £9.1 million to address backlogs across the criminal justice system that have arisen as a result of Covid.

#### TEO

TEO is being allocated £1.3m to support the ongoing work of the department in Covid recovery, including the Executive Covid Taskforce.

#### PPS

PPS is being allocated £1.2 million to support cross-justice recovery. This is in relation to DoJ bid for cross justice recovery which will result in additional costs for PPS.

#### Outcome

Following this exercise there remains £14.9 million Resource, £33.6 Capital DEL and £19.3 Financial Transactions Capital available for allocation and these sums will be incorporated into the upcoming June Monitoring Round.

#### Index of Tables

ANNEX A – RESTRICTION SCHEME Allocations

ANNEX B – BIDS

ANNEX C – DEPARTMENTAL ALLOCATIONS

#### Annex A

#### Business Support Scheme Allocations £m

Dept	Description	Resource
DFE	Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme	14.1
	COVID Restriction Business Support Scheme	18.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>32.1</b>
DoF	Localised Business Support Scheme	64.0
<b>Total Allocations</b>		<b>96.1</b>

## Annex B

## Departmental Bids

			£m
Dept	Bid	Resource	Capital
DAERA	NI SARS-2-COV Wastewater Surveillance Programme		1.0
	Rural Community Ornamental Garden Scheme		0.5
	Rural Business Community fund	0.5	
	CAFRE and NIFHA - Lost Income	0.3	
	Operating Loses - DAERA and Forestry Service	0.3	
<b>Total</b>		<b>1.1</b>	<b>1.5</b>
DfC	Grants to Local Councils	17.0	
	Community Support Programme	3.0	
	IT Assist Laptop Support	0.5	
	Employment Practices Voluntary and Community Sector	1.3	
	Arts, Culture and Heritage Recovery programme	13.0	
	To support towns and city centres	0.8	
	Sports Sustainability Fund	10.0	
	NI Restart Scheme	12.0	
	Food Interventions	1.0	
	Charities and Social Enterprise Recovery Fund	10.0	
<b>Total</b>		<b>68.6</b>	
DfE	FE sector Safe Learning, Covid Testing, cleaning and income loss	9.0	
DE	Anticipated in-year growth in 6th form - under the Common Funding Scheme (CFS) (1)	8.6	
	Pathway Fund	0.9	
	Admission Appeals Support	0.1	
	Anticipated in-year growth in 6th form - under the CFS (2)	5.0	
	Special Educational Needs (SEN)	1.4	
	SEN Services	0.4	
	Wellbeing & Pastoral Support Recovery Programme	10.0	
	CCEA COVID-19 revised pressures 2021-22	2.0	
	Irish Medium (IM) Language Acquisition Impact of COVID-19 on Learning - Interventions	0.5	
	CCMS COVID-19 pressures 2021-22	0.2	
	Personal Protection Equipment for Special Schools	0.6	
	Outdoor Education Centre COVID-19 Relief Fund	0.5	
	Outdoor play in primary schools	0.1	
	Voluntary Youth Service - Laptops/Mobile devices	1.0	
	Engagement in relation to school self-evaluation leading to improvement (Every School a Good School (SaGS))	1.4	
Getting Ready to Learn (GRtL) - additional programme costs in transitional post COVID-19 stage	0.0		
Schools' Delegated Budgets*	25.2		

			£m
Dept	Bid	Resource	Capital
	Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)*	4.4	
	PPE for Special Schools*	0.7	
	School Meals lost income*	0.6	
	Teaching & Non-Teaching staff - substitute cover *	0.4	
	Special Schools - substitute cover*	0.9	
	SEN Services *	1.1	
	Maintaining Standards & Learning*	0.2	
	Asymptomatic Testing in Special Schools*	1.5	
	Contract Cleaning - EA Services*	0.7	
	Transport - loss of income*	1.3	
	Transport - additional routes*	0.6	
	Music Service Lost Income*	2.3	
	Teacher's Laptops		19.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>72.5</b>	<b>19.0</b>
DoF	LRNI Loss of income	2.2	
	NISRA GRO loss of income	1.0	
	NICSHR staff substitution, recruitment competitions & loss of income	1.1	
	DSO legal advice – agency staff	0.2	
	CPD loss of income	0.1	
<b>Total</b>		<b>4.5</b>	
DoH	Covid-19 Vaccination Programme	13.0	
	Adult Social Care Additional Costs	12.0	
	Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professional Covid Pressures	8.5	
	Covid Status Certification (Including Citizen Digital ID)	3.0	
	Cancer Recovery Plan - Oncology Haematology Stabilisation	2.6	
	Covid - Undergraduate Medical and Dental Education (SUMDE)	2.0	
	Covid - Cancer Recovery Plan/Diagnostic Imaging	1.8	
	Mental Health Interventions	1.4	
	Cardiology	1.5	
	Provision of HIV PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) and Online STI Testing (SH24)	1.3	
	Covid - Long-Term Health Effects of Covid-19 Infection	1.0	
	International Travel	0.5	
	Other Pressures	1.9	
	Antrim ICU relocation		2.2
	Medical gases and medical oxygen		0.8
	Electrical works		0.2
	Covid capital works and Transport		1.8
	No More Silos - equipment purchase		1.6
	Covid Status Certification (Vaccine Passports)		1.5

			£m
Dept	Bid	Resource	Capital
	Data Warehouse Development/Covid Data Analysis		0.9
<b>Total</b>		<b>50.5</b>	<b>9.0</b>
DfI	Translink	50.0	
	DVA	6.9	
	Lost Income - Community Transport, Rathlin/Strangford Ferries Crumlin Rd Gaol	1.8	
	Roads Parking and Enforcement lost revenue	3.5	
<b>Total</b>		<b>62.2</b>	
DoJ	Justice Delivery Directorate	0.0	
	NI Courts and Tribunals Service	3.5	
	NI Prison Service	2.4	
	PSNI	5.8	0.6
	Criminal Justice Inspection NI	0.0	
	Cross-justice recovery bid	10.3	0.2
	Legal Services Agency bid	6.0	
<b>Total</b>		<b>27.9</b>	<b>0.9</b>
TEO	Covid Recovery (Taskforce)	1.3	
<b>Total Bids</b>		<b>297.6</b>	<b>30.4</b>

\*Bids relate to 2021-22 academic year

## Annex C

### Allocations

			£m
Dept	Description	Resource	Capital
DAERA	NI SARS-2-COV Wastewater Surveillance Programme		1.0
	Rural Community Ornamental Garden Scheme		0.5
	Rural Business Community fund	0.5	
	CAFRE and NIFHA - Lost Income	0.3	
	Operating Loses - DAERA and Forestry Service	0.3	
<b>Total</b>		<b>1.1</b>	<b>1.5</b>
DfC	Grants to Local Councils	10.0	
	Community Support Programme	3.0	
	IT Assist Laptop Support	0.5	
	Arts, Culture and Heritage Recovery programme	13.0	
	To support towns and city centres	0.8	
	Sports Sustainability Fund	5.0	
	NI Restart Scheme	12.0	
	Food Interventions	1.0	
	Charities and Social Enterprise Recovery Fund	5.0	
<b>Total</b>		<b>50.3</b>	



			£m
Dept	Description	Resource	Capital
DfE	FE sector Safe Learning, Covid Testing, cleaning and income loss	9.0	
DE	Anticipated in-year growth in 6th form - under the Common Funding Scheme (CFS) (1)	8.6	
	Pathway Fund	0.9	
	Admission Appeals Support	0.1	
	Anticipated in-year growth in 6th form - under the CFS (2)	5.0	
	Special Educational Needs (SEN)	1.4	
	SEN Services	0.4	
	Wellbeing & Pastoral Support Recovery Programme	10.0	
	CCEA COVID-19 revised pressures 2021-22	2.0	
	Irish Medium (IM) Language Acquisition Learning - Interventions	0.5	
	CCMS COVID-19 pressures 2021-22	0.2	
	Personal Protection Equipment for Special Schools	0.6	
	Outdoor Education Centre COVID-19 Relief Fund	0.5	
	Outdoor play in primary schools	0.1	
	Voluntary Youth Service - Laptops/Mobile devices	1.0	
	Engagement in relation to school self-evaluation	1.4	
	Getting Ready to Learn (GRtL) - additional programme costs	0.0	
Teacher's Laptops		19.0	
<b>Total</b>		<b>32.7</b>	<b>19.0</b>
DoF	LRNI Loss of income	1.1	
	NISRA GRO loss of income	0.5	
	NICSHR staff substitution, recruitment competitions & loss of income	1.1	
<b>Total</b>		<b>2.7</b>	
DoH	Covid-19 Vaccination Programme	13.0	
	Adult Social Care Additional Costs	12.0	
	Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professional Covid Pressures	8.5	
	Covid Status Certification (Including Citizen Digital ID)	3.0	
	Cancer Recovery Plan - Oncology Haematology Stabilisation	2.6	
	Covid - Undergraduate Medical and Dental Education (SUMDE)	2.0	
	Covid - Cancer Recovery Plan/Diagnostic Imaging	1.8	
	Mental Health Interventions	1.4	
	Cardiology	1.5	
	Provision of HIV PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) and Online STI Testing (SH24)	1.3	
	Covid - Long-Term Health Effects of Covid-19 Infection	1.0	
	International Travel	0.5	
	Other Pressures	1.9	
	Antrim ICU relocation		2.2
	Medical gases and medical oxygen		0.8

			<b>£m</b>
<b>Dept</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Resource</b>	<b>Capital</b>
	Electrical works		0.2
	Covid capital works and Transport		1.8
	No More Silos - equipment purchase		1.6
	Covid Status Certification (Vaccine Passports)		1.5
	Data Warehouse Development/Covid Data Analysis		0.9
<b>Total</b>		<b>50.5</b>	<b>9.0</b>
DfI	Lost Income	20.0	
DoJ	NI Courts and Tribunals Service	3.5	
	NI Prison Service	2.4	
	PSNI	5.8	0.6
	Cross-justice recovery	9.1	0.2
<b>Total</b>		<b>20.7</b>	<b>0.8</b>
TEO	Covid Recovery (Taskforce)	1.3	
PPS	Cross-Justice Recovery	1.2	0.0
<b>Total Allocations</b>		<b>189.5</b>	<b>30.4</b>

## The Executive Office

### Decisions of the Executive on COVID-19, 20 May 2021

*Published on 20 May 2021.*

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** Today we have been informed that the data is such that we are able to confirm that the following will come into effect from Monday 24 May:

- Reopening of unlicensed and licensed premises indoors with mitigations
- Reopening of the remainder of Tourist Accommodation including the resumption of post marriage and civil partnership events
- Removal of the restriction on staying overnight away from your normal home
- Indoor visiting in Domestic Settings
- Reopening of indoor visitor attractions - including amusement arcades, bingo halls, museums, galleries and cinemas
- The resumption of indoor group exercise and training - including soft play areas, leisure centres, gyms, swimming pools, equestrian centres, venues relating to motor sport and activity centres.
- Removal of the Stay Local messaging
- Increased numbers permitted for indoor gatherings, (not including domestic settings), with a risk assessment required for more than 15 people
- Increased numbers for outdoor gatherings to 500 or capped at risk assessment level if lower, allowing up to 500 spectators at any outdoor event. Any gatherings of over 30 people outdoors would require a risk assessment.
- Libraries will re-open
- Schools will be able to resume extra-curricular activities, indoor extra-curricular sports, outdoor inter-schools sports and day educational visits
- A full return to outdoor sport with spectators
- A return to indoor club training in squads.

Detail of the requirements in each sector is available on NIDirect and the Amendments to the Regulations will be available on the Department of Health website.

We also decided from Monday 24 May to permit the full resumption of all Sure Start services, and a further relaxation in relation to the resumption of face to face teaching in Higher and Further Education settings, as well as the resumption of student extracurricular and support activities for that sector.

On international travel, the Executive agreed to the following list of countries being included on the green list from next week:

- Australia,
- Iceland,
- New Zealand,
- Faroe Islands,
- South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands,
- Gibraltar,

- Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha,
- Brunei
- Falkland Islands,
- Portugal,
- Israel,
- and Singapore.

Requirement	Green list arrival
Pre-departure test required	Yes
Passenger location form to be completed	Yes
Day 2 test required	Yes
Day 8 test required	Required only for those returning from Portugal, Israel or Singapore
Self-isolation at home for 10 days	No

As always, we urge caution, we want to continue working through the Pathway out of Restrictions, but we have serious concerns about the variants. We need to be careful and measured in our behaviours to allow us to keep on this journey of making relaxations. We all need to make safer decisions.

Again, we ask everyone to take care of yourselves and each other, adhere to the public health advice, wear face coverings, keep the windows open, wash your hands, socially distance, and remember outdoors is generally safer than indoors.

## Department for Communities

### Amendment to the Digital Economy Act 2017 to Extend the Public Lending Rights Scheme to Include E-Lending by Public Libraries Here

*Published at 12.00 noon on 25 May 2021.*

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):** This Statement will provide you with information on my Department's decision, following engagement with Executive Colleagues and Committee for Communities, to consent to an amendment to the Digital Economy Act 2017 to extend the Public Lending Rights scheme to include the lending of e-books and e-audio by public libraries here.

My Department has been working with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DDCMS) to amend the Digital Economy Act 2017 in order to extend the Public Lending Rights (PLR) scheme to include the lending of e-books and e-audio by public libraries here.

The PLR scheme is an arrangement provided by the Public Lending Right Act 1979 for authors to receive payment from a central fund in relation to loans of their books to the public by local library authorities. The arrangement is a transferred matter here.

The PLR scheme originally covered the lending of physical books. However, recent changes include the provision to be extended for the loan of e-books and e-audio books from public libraries. This change was introduced by the Digital Economy Act 2017 (DEA 2017), and was brought into force for England, Scotland and Wales in 2018.

In the absence of an Assembly during the period when DEA 2017 was passing through Westminster it was not possible to obtain a Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) and therefore a separate route of approval was required. Having obtained legal advice, I engaged both the Communities Committee and Executive colleagues in respect of my intention to consent to the commencement of provisions of the Act that relate to devolved matters.

The commencement of the regulations, at a time when we have seen significant increased usage of e-books and e-audio books due to the Covid19 pandemic, will ensure that authors are fairly remunerated for access to their books which are downloaded by customers of public libraries.

There are no financial implications for DfC or Libraries NI. Payments in connection with e-lending are paid from a central fund administered by the British Library, and funded by DDCMS.

## The Executive Office

### Decisions of the Executive on COVID-19, 27 May 2021

*Published on Friday, 28 May 2021.*

**Mrs Arlene Foster (The First Minister) and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The deputy First Minister):** We continue to make good progress on our pathway out of restrictions.

The vaccination programme is progressing at pace and the key health indicators are encouraging, with case numbers and hospital admissions remaining at a relatively low level.

The Executive has yesterday confirmed the return of indoor competitive sport from 31 May, with mitigations.

Recognising the need for clarity on movement within the Common Travel Area (CTA), the Executive has agreed to update the guidance with immediate effect.

While we ask everyone to think carefully about the need to travel, anyone seeking to travel here from within the CTA may now do so for any reason without the requirement to self-isolate.

Those arriving here from another area of the CTA who are staying at least overnight, are asked to:

- Take a Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test before they make the journey; and only travel if the test is negative.
- Take an LFD test on days two and eight after arrival; and if either test is positive, self-isolate immediately.

People should not make the journey if they have Covid symptoms; and must not travel if they know they have Covid-19.

This advice applies to visitors from other parts of the CTA, and those who are ordinarily resident here and returning home from another part of the CTA.

In light of the higher prevalence of variants of concern (VOCs) in other regions of the CTA, it is important that these measures are adhered to, which will help to mitigate against the risks of transmission.

It remains crucially important that everyone follows the public health advice and takes all possible steps to keep themselves and others safe.

# Committee Stages



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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Communities

6 May 2021

## Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill [NIA 10/17-22]

### Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Paula Bradley (Chairperson)  
Ms Kellie Armstrong (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Andy Allen  
Mr Mark Durkan  
Mr Alex Easton  
Ms Sinéad Ennis  
Mr Fra McCann  
Ms Karen Mullan  
Mr Robin Newton

### Witnesses:

Mr Liam Quinn                      *Department for*  
Ms Carol Reid                        *Communities*

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** At last week's meeting, we agreed the text of the first set of departmental amendments that we requested for clauses 4, 11, 12, 27, 28, 29 and a new clause, 24A. The remaining amendments and new clauses are in members' tabled papers. We will go through them in the order that they are dealt with in the Department's letter.

First, we will look at new clause 1A, which provides for the amendment on the removal of restrictions on late night opening on Sunday for licensed premises. Are members content with the amendment?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** I will move on to new clause 23A, which provides for the removal of restrictions on late night opening on Sunday for clubs. Are members content with the amendment?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** New clause 22A provides for the amendment on alterations to registered clubs. Are members content with the amendment?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** If I do not hear anybody say no, I will move on, so if you are not content, please speak up.

I will move on to the amendment to clause 29, which is "Young people prohibited from bars". This is the amendment to provide a regulation-making power to amend the months referred to in 29(1) and the number of

prize-giving ceremonies referred to in 29(2). Are members content with the amendment?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** New clause 32A provides for the Department to produce guidance. Are members content with that amendment?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** I will move on to new clause 32B, which provides for the Department to carry out reviews. Are members content with that amendment?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** The amendment to schedule 1 is on one-day membership. This amendment clarifies the policy in respect of the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, which allows a member of the public to pay a fee that allows them to use the facilities of a sporting club for a day, to ensure that it is not used to allow someone to simply use the bar facilities. Are members content with the amendment?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** The Committee will now commence the formal clause-by-clause consideration of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill with Liam Quinn and Carol Reid from the Department. Claire McCanny from the Bill Office has also joined the meeting. I will read out the title of the clause before I ask the formal Question on the clause. If members have any final queries for Liam or Carol, please alert me before I read out the formal Question as to whether the Committee is content with the clause as drafted or amended. Are members clear on that?

**Ms Armstrong:** Can we get StarLeaf to do something about your microphone? It is up and down. To be honest, I can barely hear you.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** OK. I have not been getting the same feedback that I was getting earlier. There is a little, but it is not too bad.

I advise members that, throughout this clause-by-clause consideration, I will need to hear people say yes, or I will need to see a show of hands. We will try the first couple of clauses. Kellie, if you are getting feedback or finding it

difficult to hear, I will ask all members to mute themselves and use their hands-up function.

**Ms Armstrong:** It is not feedback, Chair, it is your microphone. The sound is dipping in and out.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** My microphone?

**Ms Armstrong:** Yes.

**The Assistant Committee Clerk:** Broadcasting have said that it is people not muting their microphones that is causing an issue with yours.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** OK. Everybody should know how to use the hands-up function on their screen. I cannot see everybody. Mark, I will ask you to use the hands-up function on your screen. I can see all the other members other than Fra, who does not appear to be on the screen at the moment. He is on the big screen. It is just my small screen that he is not on.

Can everybody please put themselves on silent? That will stop any feedback, and we will give it a go from there.

**The Committee Clerk:** We can take it slowly.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** We can take our time with this. Is everybody now on silent? OK.

I will just read that out again. Liam and Carol are here for any final queries that members might have. If you have a query, you need to alert me as we go along with each clause, before I say that the Committee is content. We will take our time. We will try the first one, and we will see how we get on.

#### **Clause 1 (Removal of additional restrictions at Easter)**

**Mr Newton:** Sunday opening does give me a problem, but I understand that it is the mind of the Committee to support the clause.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** I understand that, Robin. Thanks for highlighting that. We can reflect that. Robin has said that he has a problem with the clause but understands that it is the mind of the Committee to support it.

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 1, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with new clause 1A, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 2, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 3, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 4, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 5, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 6, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 7, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 8, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.*

#### **New Clause**

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Is the Committee content with new clause 8A as drafted for the Committee by the Bill Office? Can I see a show of hands for those in favour? I cannot see everybody; that is the problem. I will go to members as I see them on my screen. Andy, are you in favour of new clause 8A?

**Mr Allen:** I am content, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Alex, are you content?

**Mr Easton:** I am content.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Sinéad, are you content?

**Ms Ennis:** No, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Kellie, are you content?

**Ms Armstrong:** I have reservations, but I am content to proceed.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Robin, are you content?

**Mr Newton:** I understand that the Committee is of a mind to agree to it, so I am content.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Karen Mullan, are you content?

**Ms Mullan:** No, Chair. My position is the same as it was last week: I support the Minister's position.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Mark, are you content?

**Mr Durkan:** Yes. Can I record an interest? Like Kellie, I have some reservations, although they might be different reservations. I think that the amendment reflects the Committee's difficulty in its deliberations on this particular issue, so I am content.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Fra, are you content?

**Mr McCann:** It is the same position as last week: no.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** I am content with clause 8A as drafted for the Committee by the Bill Office.

*Question, That the Committee is content with new clause 8A, put and agreed to.*

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** The Committee is content with the amendment, albeit the discussion will be reflected in our Committee report and when I get up to speak on it in the Chamber.

#### **New Clause**

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Andy, are you content with clause 8B?

**Mr Allen:** Content, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Fra, are you content with clause 8B?

**Mr McCann:** No, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Mark, are you content with clause 8B?

**Mr Durkan:** Yes.



**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Karen, are you content with clause 8B?

**Ms Mullan:** No, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Robin, are you content with clause 8B?

**Mr Newton:** Same position: I understand that it is the mind of the Committee to approve it.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Kellie, are you content with clause 8B?

**Ms Armstrong:** Yes.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Sinéad, are you content with clause 8B?

**Ms Ennis:** Can you remind me again of the gist of clause 8B, just really quickly?

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** It is the part about occasional licences.

**Ms Ennis:** No, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Alex, are you content with clause 8B?

**Mr Easton:** Yes, thanks.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** I am content with clause 8B. There is majority support within the Committee.

*Question, That the Committee is content with new clause 8B, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 9, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 10, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 11, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 12, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 13, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 14, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 15, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 16, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 17, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with new clause 17A, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 18, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 19, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 20, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 21, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 22, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with new clause 22A, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 23, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with new clause 23A, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 24, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with new clause 24A, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 25, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 26, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 27, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 28, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 29, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 30, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 31, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 32, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with new clause 32A, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with new clause 32B, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 33, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 34, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 35, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 36, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 1, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 2, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with the long title, put and agreed to.*

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** That concludes the Committee's formal clause-by-clause consideration of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill. I thank the departmental officials, Liam and Carol, for all their support and patience in answering all our queries. Also, I thank Claire McCanny from the Assembly's Bill

Office for her support and for producing the proposed Committee amendments.

**Mr Newton:** Sorry, Chair, I tried to come in on clause 23, which deals with the additional restrictions at Easter. Will you record the same position for me as before?

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** OK. I wondered why you did not come in at that stage.

**Mr Newton:** I tried to, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** OK. We will indicate that.

**Mr Newton:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Again, just a big thank-you to Liam, Carol and Claire for the patience, time and understanding. I am sure that patience was required at many moments with us lot through that.

**Ms Carol Reid (Department for Communities):** Thank you, Chair.

**Mr Liam Quinn (Department for Communities):** Thank you, Chair. It was a privilege to work with you on this Bill. The detailed scrutiny by the Committee just shows the benefit of the Committee Stage.

**The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley):** Thank you very much for that, Liam.

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Justice

6 May 2021

## Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill [NIA XX/17-22]

### Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)  
Ms Linda Dillon (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Sinéad Bradley  
Ms Jemma Dolan  
Mr Paul Frew  
Miss Rachel Woods

**The Chairperson (Mr Givan):** Following the informal deliberations of the Bill's clauses that took place on 22 April, the Committee agreed that it would not be tabling any amendments to the Bill and that it was content with the Bill as drafted. Officials have also confirmed that the Department does not intend to propose any amendments to the Bill.

The Committee will now undertake its formal clause-by-clause consideration. I will go through the Bill's clauses and schedule and will put the Questions formally. Members, it should be straightforward — famous last words — given the positions that we all have on it. I need to go through it formally.

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 1, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 2, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 3, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 4, put and agreed to.*

*Schedule*

**The Chairperson (Mr Givan):** I will put the Question on the schedule before I put the Question on clause 5, as clause 5 covers the commencement of the clauses and the schedule.

*Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 5, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with clause 6, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That the Committee is content with the long title, put and agreed to.*

**The Chairperson (Mr Givan):** OK, members. Thank you for going through that. The draft report on the Bill is being prepared and will be circulated to members for consideration before the end of May. Once we have the draft report, that will allow us to close off the consideration process.

Thank you, members. I also thank the Committee staff for their work.



# 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.



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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 7 May 2021

## Written Answers to Questions

### The Executive Office

**Mr McGrath** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many written questions are currently unanswered from their Department.  
(AQW 6948/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister):** 192 of the Written Assembly Questions tabled to The Executive Office in the period to 20 April 2021 currently remain to be answered, including those still within the period for answer specified in Standing Orders.

**Miss Woods** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when (i) AQW 2690/17-22; (ii) AQW 4709/17-22; (iii) AQW 4873/17-22; (iv) AQW 5149/17-22; (v) AQW 5912/17-22; and (vi) AQW 5916/17-22 will be answered.  
(AQW 7942/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** A response to:

- AQW 2690 issued on 19 March 2020;
- AQW 4709 issued on 25 March 2021;
- AQW 4873 issued on 1 April 2021;
- AQW 5149 issues on 29 October 2020;
- AQW 5912 issued on 28 October 2020; and
- AQW 5916 issued on 2 October 2020.

**Mr Buckley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the recent statements attributed to the Member for North Belfast, Mr Gerry Kelly, on the escape from the Maze, for their assessment of (i) the characterisation, as crass hypocrisy, of remarks during question number three of Question Time to the Executive Office on 28 September 2020; and (ii) how such statements accord with building a united community.  
(AQW 8182/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Ministers in The Executive Office are committed to ending sectarianism in our society and also to engaging with members of the Assembly as we take this work forward. It is our hope that they and all public representatives will share fully in realising this objective.

**Mr Muir** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how often; and (ii) where performance statistics on Ministerial responses to Assembly Questions are published.  
(AQW 10251/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Executive Office officials have recently concluded a cross departmental consultation with each of the departments on the proposed format, content and frequency of publication of written Assembly Question statistics. It is intended that these statistics will be published shortly to align with the sitting periods of the Assembly, with statistics for the period September to December 2020.

**Ms Sugden** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what discussions they have had with (a) stakeholders in the religious community; and (b) other Executive departments regarding the provision of support to faith communities that are either vulnerable to hate crime or which have been subject to hate crime; and; (ii) what plans they have to address the issue.  
(AQW 11303/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Racial Equality Subgroup has representation from the Belfast Islamic Centre and the Belfast Jewish Community (BJC). The First Minister and Junior Minister Kearney met with the Subgroup on 27th January 2021 and Hate Crime was one of the issues discussed at this meeting. Officials also meet regularly with the subgroup and members have actively engaged with the Marrinan Review of Hate Crime Legislation.

Hate crime is a key focus of the Racial Equality Strategy and our officials are also

working with their counterparts in DoJ and other Departments to consider how to tackle the underlying enabling factors of hate, ensuring links between the Racial Equality Strategy and wider Good Relations work.

We are also aware that the Department of Justice is considering a Places of Worship Protection Scheme here, in response to hate crime attacks, echoing a similar scheme to that introduced in England and Wales and being developed in Scotland. Since the initial consideration of a funding scheme, in the context of places of worship, the potential scheme has evolved taking into consideration the needs of other key buildings also targeted by hate crime. This development has been informed by:

- The Minister of Justice's meeting with representatives from the Grand Orange Lodge Ireland who are concerned about the vulnerability of some properties in rural locations;
- Judge Marrinan's Report on Hate Crime Legislation which confirms the need to retain religion as a protected group in future hate crime legislation;
- Discussions with the Community Faiths' Forum, including a recent online engagement event, on 25 January 2021 reviewing steps to be taken to mitigate the risk of future attacks.

Emphasis must be on preventative actions protecting places of worship and other buildings from hate crime attacks.

**Mr McGrath** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the amount of munitions and radioactive waste dumped in the Beaufort's Dyke, whether they can confirm that the Northern Ireland Executive has relayed these safety issues to the UK Government who are considering building a bridge between Northern Ireland and Scotland.

**(AQW 11415/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** As your companion question suggests, the existence of munitions and other material in Beaufort's Dyke is generally known, and it has not been considered necessary to bring these to the UK Government's attention. Clearly, should that Government wish to progress this proposal further this would be a major factor in evaluating the feasibility of options.

**Mr Storey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the total level of COVID-19 related expenditure from their Department since 1 March 2020; and to provide an overview of each scheme or policy funded under this heading.

**(AQW 16624/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The total level of funding made available to TEO for COVID-19 related expenditure has amounted to £7.5million since 1 March 2020. This has been used to fund the Executive's public information and communications campaigns, the operation of the NI Hub over the emergency response phase of the pandemic, a Covid Response/Recovery team within the Department, including support for the Executive's COVID-19 Taskforce, and a grant support scheme for Travel Agents.

**Mr Carroll** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many meetings have (i) they; and (ii) their departmental officials held in the last year in relation to developing Irish language legislation.

**(AQW 16726/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** There is a team of TEO officials which are engaged in progressing the legislative provisions on language, identity and culture as set out in NDNA.

**Mr Clarke** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that so many of their departmental staff are working from home, often in rural locations with substandard connections, whether their Department will consider covering the costs incurred by his staff to install superfast broadband, or available alternatives, in their homes.

**(AQW 17419/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** 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 our 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 McNulty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide clarity and guidance in relation to wedding receptions/parties, including if they are permitted indoors in line with a risk assessment before 24 May 2021.

**(AQW 17473/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Receptions or post ceremony gatherings are not permitted at this time.



An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the reopening of hospitality, to include the resumption of post ceremony receptions or functions. This is subject to review.

Information on the current marriage and civil partnerships COVID-19 Regulations and guidance can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-weddings-and-civil-partnerships#toc-4>

**Mr Frew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) when will live solo musicians be permitted to play music to a group of diners seated in an outside setting; and (ii) why this is not permitted when outside hospitality reopens on 30 April. (AQW 17947/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Under the current regulations live music is not permitted for licensed or unlicensed premises reopening from 30 April.

Mitigations are in place to support premises to adhere to the public health advice which recommends keeping noise levels low, to prevent shouting and singing and allow conversations to take place in a socially distanced way. These measures allow premises to reopen safely and reduce the risk of transmission.

The next review of the restrictions will take place on 13 May.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

**Ms Sugden** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any plans to re-assess and revise Executive policies, post-COVID-19, in order that they reflect our changing society where more people are moving toward rural areas. (AQW 18024/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Good progress has been achieved towards the development of a new Programme for Government (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.

It is important that the new PfG recognises and proactively responds to the needs of a changing society and that it delivers impactful improvements in the things that matter most to people. The focus will be on designing and shaping policies and services in a way that will achieve the best possible outcomes of societal wellbeing.

To that end, it is intended that the new PfG will be a "live" web-based Programme, with progress being continually monitored to ensure that actions respond to changing needs and new challenges.

**Dr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline whether concerns have been raised at the EU-UK Joint Committee about potential increases in prices for Northern Ireland consumers as a result of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQO 970/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Joint Committee has responsibilities regarding the implementation and application of the Protocol. It has now met on 7 occasions, most recently on 24 February. We, along with the Junior Ministers, have ensured the Executive has been represented at all of the meetings.

We have repeatedly made clear at every possible opportunity, the need to secure the best possible outcome for our unique circumstances.

We will continue to ensure our position is taken into account, by all sides, in order to protect the interests of all of our citizens and businesses.

## Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has reached a decision to compensate farmers impacted by flooding in the Glenelly Valley in August 2017. (AQW 16862/17-22)

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I recently visited the area to learn about the challenges faced by those directly affected and see the impact of the landslides. I spoke with representatives of the Ulster Farmers Union, local farmers and political representatives to hear about the work required to restore land back to productivity.

I considered carefully all the relevant issues and information presented to me, and I am pleased to inform you that £3.45 million will be made available from my Department for a support scheme. This funding will make a contribution towards compensating farmers in the area who were directly impacted by the severe flooding in the North West in August 2017.

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline to what extent his Department and the Department for Infrastructure have developed joint working procedures to ensure that the link between lax planning enforcement and illegal dumping, as identified as a central feature of the Mobuoy case, have been addressed.

**(AQW 16941/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Since 1 April 2015 responsibility for the majority of planning decisions rests with locally elected councils. In their role as local planning authorities, local councils also have primary responsibility for the enforcement of planning control.

The engagement between my Department and the Department for Infrastructure therefore has been limited in respect of the question you raise. However I can advise that officials in both DAERA and DfI have a shared approach to addressing waste crime and work co-operatively in a DAERA led Project Board which continues to address the issues arising from the Mobuoy site.

However for completeness, and in respect of the role of local planning authorities, my colleagues in DfI have kindly advised that further to the Mills report, the DfI made changes in relation to planning policy, procedures and guidance, including the cancellation of Planning Policy Statement 9 "The Enforcement of Planning Control" and its replacement by a series of practice notes. More recently DfI has committed to the development of further targeted guidance to support district councils in their role as local planning authorities.

DfI is also developing a number of pieces of guidance relating to different aspects of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process. The first element of guidance deals with unauthorised EIA development. This is part of a wider programme of work with councils which has also involved the development and delivery of tailored EIA training in conjunction with an external EIA expert and a clear focus on the proper management of unauthorised development.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to hunting dogs, what action his Department is taking to ensure that animal welfare standards are upheld.

**(AQW 17237/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department is aware of your plan to bring forward a Private Member's Bill to prohibit the hunting of wild mammals with dogs. Hunting dogs themselves are, however, non-farmed animals. Therefore, while those responsible for hunting dogs must take into account my Department's Code of Practice for the Welfare of Dogs, responsibility for enforcing any animal welfare obligations in respect of them is a matter for local councils.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of (i) times; and (ii) locations when wastewater that exceeded pollution limits was released into waterways, in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 17294/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** NIEA regulate discharges to the aquatic environment under the Water Order (Northern Ireland) 1999 as amended. Wastewater refers to a range of discharges that include; sewage related discharges, industrial discharges and site drainage discharges.

I have therefore provided below the number of times and locations for all wastewater discharges and pollution incidents where an exceedance has been detected to be in breach of its Water Order Consent in each of the last 5 years.

**Number of Exceedances detected in the last 5 years**

Type of Discharge	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Private Sewage, Industrial Discharge and Site Drainage Discharges	391	403	376	495	159*
NI Water	167	187	121	108	117

**Number of Locations where an exceedance has been detected in the last 5 years**

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Private Sewage, Industrial Discharge and Site Drainage Discharges	247	233	238	286	133
NI Water	48	60	47	45	46

\*Reduced Regulatory Sampling Regime due to the Covid Restrictions.

**Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 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 17331/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The Civil Service has published, on the DoF Internet and on all departmental intranets, "Working from Home Guidance" in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Details can be found at: Covid-19 Working From Home Guidance.

Staff within DAERA have been advised that reimbursement for the additional cost of increased broadband data charges, incurred solely as result of working from home, will be considered.

Staff have also been notified that, where appropriate, having considered options such as the provision of a Data SIM for laptops, or an external WiFi hub, the Department may reimburse the additional cost of installing broadband and may cover monthly tariffs on the basis that the charges incurred are solely related to working from home.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether any of his Department's publications or advertising campaigns use images that have been photoshopped to alter the body of the participants.

**(AQW 17366/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department's publications and advertising campaigns use a variety of images from different sources, some through stock images and some via professional photographers or taken internally by staff. No images that my Department uses have been photoshopped to alter the body of the participants.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has further plans to undertake any new studies into endangered wildlife species.

**(AQW 17449/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department has responsibility for maintaining lists of priority species, and in particular, endangered species or species of conservation concern. Much of our work focuses on monitoring their status and their habitats to inform conservation measures. Much of this work is ongoing, either by Departmental staff or by external environmental organisations acting on DAERA's behalf, and has been previously detailed.

Threatened farmland birds, particularly seed-eaters and wading birds, are a current priority, and contract work is commencing this year to evaluate the impact of recent conservation measures on these. Some further studies on the freshwater pearl mussel are also planned, and there is a growing focus on threatened invertebrate species.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of vets that will be required to check livestock at Northern Ireland's ports on completion of the ports' infrastructure project.

**(AQW 17487/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Livestock only enter Northern Ireland through the port of Larne. The port operates around the clock and livestock can arrive on any sailing. All consignments must be inspected.

Five veterinary inspectors are currently headquartered in Larne Port with at least one vet on each of the four shift teams.

Livestock inspections comprise only part of the vet's work but it is not anticipated that the number of animals arriving or the resource requirement for livestock checks will increase significantly in the future.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether inspections by his Department are carried on imported bees to detect and prevent the small hive beetle infection of indigenous bees.

**(AQW 17506/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Bees moving into Northern Ireland (NI) are subject to controls within the EU legislative framework. These controls apply when moving bees between countries within the EU and including into NI. Prohibitions apply to the movements of bees generally from third countries, except for Queen bees that can be moved subject to specified conditions being met.

Movement of bees into NI from the EU are required to be accompanied by an Animal Health Certificate, issued by the competent authority of the country of origin following inspection by an official. Certificates attest that bees are free from American Foulbrood, Small hive beetle (*Aethina tumida*) and Tropilaelaps mite (*Tropilaelaps* spp.).

These bee movements are subject to pre-notification, documentary checks and physical checks, as determined by the Department on a risk basis.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the funding to replace that received from the EU for the Rural Development Programme.

**(AQW 17585/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** At this stage there are no new funding updates. The 2019 Conservative Manifesto Commitment is to guarantee the current annual budget to farmers in every year of the next Parliament.

I have written to the Defra Secretary of State emphasising the importance of maintaining these payments to farmers, land managers and for the rural economy in Northern Ireland. EU replacement funding issues are also discussed at the regular UK Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs meetings which I attend.

Alongside the Budget announcement on 3 March, UKG has launched funds for three areas - Community Renewal Fund, Levelling Up Fund and Community Ownership Fund, which you may find of interest.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department is taking to prevent wildfires decimating biodiversity.

**(AQW 17657/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Your question is unfortunately timely given the horrific recent gorse fire that occurred in the Mourne Mountains. I would take this opportunity to convey my thanks to the wide range of internal partners and others who provided assistance and who were involved in the efforts to extinguish the blaze.

The full extent of damage to the environment has yet to be determined but it is clear that it has had a significant detrimental effect on the habitat, flora and fauna over an extensive area. It may take generations for any areas that have been ravaged to recover and some biodiversity may be lost forever. The damage to health caused by air pollutants, the huge financial and resource strain that wildfires incur and the subsequent loss to our economy through a decrease in overseas visitors, already impacted by the current Covid-19 restrictions, who come to see our unique and beautiful landscape are equally important consequences.

The cause of the fire has yet to be confirmed however, previous experience has shown that the vast majority of wildfires in Northern Ireland have been caused by accidental damage, burning or arson.

We are in the middle of the season when wildfires typically occur and we are also entering a period when further lockdown restrictions may be eased. This will result in an increase in the number of visitors to our wider countryside, enjoying the fresh air and the associated benefits that being outdoors brings to our well-being.

I am frustrated and understandably angry that we find ourselves dealing with another major wildfire incident despite the continuing warnings about their dangers. There has been advice provided on how to prevent wildfires by my Department, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) & a wide range of partners including government Departments, eNGOs & local landowners. The vast majority of the public act responsibly but unfortunately there is a small number within our society who show blatant disregard for the outcome of their actions.

This situation cannot be allowed to continue and it is clear that a more holistic and strategic approach is required across all stakeholders to combat the issue of wildfires.

In my response to AQW 16564/17-22 which you previously raised regarding the implementation of a ban on setting peat bog fires, I stated that my Department is developing a Peatland Strategy for Northern Ireland. 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 should clarify my Department's advice with regard to the use of burning as a management tool for semi-natural peatlands in Northern Ireland.

I have also taken the following measures to address the crisis and I will closely monitor progress made.

- 1 NIEA established a NI Strategic Wildfire Group (the Group) composed of key strategic Government and Public Bodies. The first meeting took place in March 2021. The Group will have an overarching governance role in supporting and driving this work forward. Its initial task will be to develop a Strategic Framework for Wildfire work in NI and to develop associated Recommendations to take forward.
- 2 NIEA will also establish a NI Wildfire Stakeholder Forum (the Forum) encompassing a wide range of wildfire stakeholders. The Forum will develop, implement, monitor and review Action Plans to deliver the Strategic Framework and Recommendations developed by the Strategic Wildfire Group. These Plans will be developed by NIEA, in conjunction with other partners including local, national and international stakeholders and experts.
- 3 NIEA will host a UK Wildfire Conference in November 2022, an event scheduled for November 2021 but postponed due to COVID-19.

My Department will continue to work in partnership with others to reduce the threat of wildfires in our countryside.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions his Department has had with (i) farmers; and (ii) industry representatives in relation to promoting wildlife-friendly farming techniques.

**(AQW 17658/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Protecting and enhancing our biodiversity and wildlife is a key priority for my Department, as is the delivery of more wildlife-friendly farming. My officials engage with farmers and farming stakeholders on policy initiatives and schemes designed to enhance the natural environment for biodiversity and wildlife.

Through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) my Department delivers Knowledge Transfer, Innovation and Technology Transfer programmes, which aim to improve future performance, sustainability and resilience of the agri-food industry.

My Department's Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) supports farmers and land managers to carry out environmentally beneficial farming practices on agricultural land. CAFRE delivers training to all Environmental Farming Scheme participants, including on the wildlife friendly options within this scheme.

CAFRE also deal directly with farmers through Business Development Groups, which provide a training forum that allows sharing of knowledge (peer-to-peer learning) with the aim of improving technical efficiency and environmental performance. Wildlife friendly farming techniques are a key component of the Environmental Business Development Groups.

NIEA is working with a number of partners to develop a series of conservation management plans for our Special Areas of Conservation, involving engagement with key stakeholders over the necessary conservation measures, largely delivered through wildlife friendly farming.

My Department continues to engage farmers and the industry around current and future policy development, along with practical implementation of the necessary measures and this will continue as we move towards delivery of key national and international commitments.

Work is underway to develop the future agri-environment policy framework for Northern Ireland. Engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including farmers, the agricultural industry, and environmental sector, will be required to inform development of future agri-environment schemes and associated policy instruments. Initial meetings with UFU and the Nature Friendly Farming Network have taken place.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action his Department is taking to halt the decline of (i) yellowhammers; and (ii) other priority farmland birds.

**(AQW 17659/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the WANE Act) which places a statutory duty on my Department to maintain lists of priority species requiring conservation action, including priority farmland birds.

DAERA supports monitoring and research on farmland bird species, particularly through work by the British Trust for Ornithology, and the RSPB. This work is used to inform which species are considered priority bird species in Northern Ireland, and provides evidence on the effectiveness of conservation measures being implemented.

My Department also undertakes a range of actions which directly benefit declining farmland birds, of which agri-environment schemes, such as the Environmental Farming Scheme, are the most important. The Wider Scheme EFS(W) has a range of options designed to benefit Yellowhammer and other seed-eating birds. The Higher Scheme EFS(H) has options to manage habitats, such as upland heathland and blanket bog, which are important for upland birds, including breeding waders and threatened birds of prey. My Department has recently commissioned a large project to monitor the impact of EFS on farmland birds.

In addition, DAERA has supported a number of conservation organisations to help priority farmland birds through raising awareness and through species-specific conservation measures.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 (as amended), (i) to detail when trees, hedges and woodlands could be removed or felled; (ii) whether an assessment or survey would be required before works are carried out to remove trees, if nesting birds or bats were suspected; and (iii) if so, by whom.

**(AQW 17660/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:**

- i The Wildlife Order affords protection to certain species of wild animals, birds and plants, including wild animals' places of shelter or protection, and birds' nests while in use. It does not detail when trees, hedges and woodlands can be removed or felled. The bird nesting season in Northern Ireland is taken to be between 1 March and 31 August, and these are the dates advised to farmers and landowners to avoid when cutting hedges or carrying out related land management activities.
- ii. A survey should be carried out prior to the removal of trees, if nesting birds or bats are suspected of being present.
- iii. Responsibility for such a survey lies with the land or property owner.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the impact the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board will have on the pay of workers and their rights at work.

**(AQW 17678/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Subject to Executive agreement, and successful passage through the Assembly, the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board (through the revocation of the Agricultural Wages (Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1977) would end the setting of specific wage rates, and other terms and conditions, for the agriculture sector, bringing the sector into alignment with all other sectors of the economy. The effect of this would be that agricultural workers would subsequently receive the same minimum protections as all other employees under UK and NI employment law and minimum wage rates.

Under the Agricultural Wages (Regulation) (NI) Order 1977, the Agricultural Wages Board has the power, in relation to agricultural workers, to:

- set a minimum rate of pay;
- determine the type and value of deductions that an employer may make from a worker's gross pay;
- set the amount of holiday entitlement and holiday pay; and
- set the level of sick pay.

The legislation also provides powers of investigation and enforcement, delegated to DAERA officers, and makes it an offence not to comply with the provisions of the legislation.

Should the AWB be abolished, the prospective changes in the legislative provisions are summarised in the table below:

Measure	For Agricultural Workers	For Other Workers
Minimum rate of pay	AWB NI rates (outlined below)	NMW & NLW rates (outlined below) <b>(National Minimum Wage Act 1998)</b>
Minimum rate of overtime	1.5 times the hourly rate of pay (for any hours over 39 hrs/week)	None set
Maximum amount deductible for provision of accommodation	£45.00/week	£58.52/week <b>(National Minimum Wage Act 1998)</b>
Paid holiday entitlement	5.6 weeks/year (28 days for a worker working 5 days a week) + one additional day for workers employed for over a year	5.6 weeks/year (28 days for a worker working 5 days a week) <b>(Working Time Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016)</b>
Amount of paid sick leave	After one year's continuous employment and paid after being off sick for 4 or more days, a maximum of 60 days in a rolling 12 month period or 120 days in a rolling 48 month period.	Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) paid after being off sick for 4 or more days, for a maximum of 28 weeks <b>(Statutory Sick Pay (General) Regulations 1982)</b>
Level of sick pay	1/10th the weekly minimum rate of AWB pay for each day sick, plus SSP	SSP = £95.85/week
Powers of enforcement	DAERA	HMRC (NMW, NLW and Sick Pay) <b>Northern Ireland Health and Safety Executive (Working Time/ Holiday entitlements) <sup>1</sup></b>

1 Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority also have powers of enforcement across these areas where appropriate

### Minimum Wage Rates

The current AWB minimum rates came into effect on 1 April 2021 as below:

Grade	Rate per hour (£) <sup>2</sup>
<b>Grade 1</b> (for first 40 weeks cumulative employment)	6.95
<b>Grade 2</b> standard worker	7.49
<b>Grade 3</b> lead worker	8.91
<b>Grade 4</b> craft grade	9.58
<b>Grade 5</b> supervisory grade	10.09
<b>Grade 6</b> farm management grade	10.95

2 This is the minimum hourly rate before tax and national insurance deductions.

### UK National Minimum Wage (NMW) and National Living Wage (NLW)

Current NMW and NLW rates as at 2021 are outlined below.

23 and over <sup>3</sup>	21 to 22	18 to 20	Under 18	Apprentice
£8.91	£8.36	£6.56	£4.62	£4.30

3 The NLW age threshold was lowered from age 25+ to those aged 23+ in April 2021

The NMW and NLW are set by the UK government on the basis of recommendations of the Low Pay Commission (LPC). The LPC is an independent body made up of employers, trade unions and economic and labour experts on a full UK basis, including the agriculture sector since the abolition of the AWB in England in 2013.

Where the NMW or NLW rates are higher than AWB rates, an agricultural worker in Northern Ireland must be paid the NMW or NLW rate.

### Summary of changes and impacts

The age-based national minimum wage rates for the 20 and under age groups is lower (at £4.62 and £6.56) than the current AWB entry and standard grade pay rates (Grades 1 and 2 at £6.95 and £7.49 respectively). For workers over the age of 21 at the standard grades the NMW is higher at £8.20 and the National Living Wage applicable from age 23 (from 2021, lowered from age 25 in previous years) is higher again at £8.91. The overall trend shows increases across all rates under both AWB

and NMW/ NLW pay structures, however the latter are increasing at a greater rate than the AWB rates, which, if continued could reduce the impact on workers, particularly younger workers. The gap between the AWB and NMW rates for ages 18-20 is closing, but remains 39p below the AWB rate at present. The National Living Wage shows the steepest rises.

The rates above relate to the minimums applicable and it would not necessarily follow that the statutory minimum pay rates would be the default position for all workers, instead they are the threshold below which it would be unlawful to go.

Based on the table above, the statutory minimum for holiday allowance for agricultural workers could be reduced by one day for employees with one year's continuous service unless, otherwise specified in a contract of employment. Temporary, casual or new workers would be unaffected. The amount of sick pay could be reduced for workers who meet the one year continuous service requirement, but are not under contract or agreement. Temporary, casual or new workers would be unaffected. Overtime rates may be lower if no contract is in place and the minimum is applied. It is expected that workers under contract would retain their current terms and conditions.

The impact of these changes would therefore depend on a number of factors such as age, current grade, whether a contract applies and how employers choose to implement pay rates in future. It is therefore likely that there will be a differential or variable impact on individuals ranging from negative; to positive; to none.

These factors and the impacts will be considered in more detail through the assessment of Equality, Regulatory and Rural Needs impacts. Consultation on the draft statutory impact assessments will be carried out in parallel with consultation on the policy proposals.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for a breakdown of the annual running costs of the Agricultural Wages Board.

**(AQW 17681/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The total running cost of the Agricultural Wages Board in the 2019<sup>1</sup> calendar year was £ 24187.08. This cost is broken down as follows:

Attendance fees:	£2,557.76
Travel and subsistence:	£693.05
Advertising:	£6,594.33
Agricultural Wages Order 2019 (update to annual pay rates):	£152.10
Hospitality:	£89.45
Independent Assessor (Public Appointment process):	£1,252.49
Secretariat Support (DAERA Staff Costs) <sup>2</sup> :	£12,847.90

Running costs may vary annually depending on factors including costs relating to public appointments, legal advice, translation services, complaints investigation and enforcement or publications.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) whether his Department is aware how much diesel was leaked onto Millisle beach; (ii) how his Department intends to assess the damage caused by the pollution incident, including through water quality testing; and (iii) how his Department communicates pollution incidents to the public when they occur.

**(AQW 17754/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:**

- (i) The matter is still under active investigation and the quantity of diesel that escaped onto the beach it has not yet been established.
- (ii) Post-incident monitoring of any spill into the marine environment will depend on multiple factors; including the amount and nature of the discharged substance, the prevailing physical conditions at the site and the sensitivity and nature of the receiving environment. The need for monitoring is guided by recognised best practice such as the "Pollution Response in Emergencies Marine Impact Assessment and Monitoring (PREMIAM) Post-Incident Monitoring Guidelines". The monitoring of impact on biota is a more appropriate assessment method than monitoring through water sampling in this instance. Officers from the Marine Intertidal Assessment Team have been on site in the week following the incident to carry out a post spill assessment.
- (iii) The communication of pollution incidents to the public depends upon the location, type and severity of this incident. The Pollution response team liaise with the DAERA press team to develop press releases and updates. The source of this pollution incident was adjacent to the Millisle bathing water. Ards and North Down Borough Council (the bathing water operator) took immediate steps by way of press releases and social media posts to communicate that an incident was ongoing in the area and to advise members of the public not to handle or attempt to clean-up any oil or chemical spillage. The public were advised to report any pollution to the NIEA Incident Hotline on 0800 807060 or email [emergency-pollution@daera-ni.gov.uk](mailto:emergency-pollution@daera-ni.gov.uk).

1 The AWB reports on a biennial basis. The latest available report covers the 2018-2019 calendar years.

2 No enforcement action was required in two-year reporting period 2018-2019, therefore no enforcement costs were incurred.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the support given to, and the conversations had with, local councils and community and voluntary environmental groups regarding litter and pollution clean-ups.

**(AQW 17788/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** DAERA uses a combined approach of legislation, education & awareness, and enforcement to tackle litter. My Department 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'; 'Big Spring Clean; & '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 communities, and focus on practical, positive environmental behavioural change.

DAERA supports the 'Big Spring Clean,' this is NI's largest community clean-up campaign. To date, 100 Big Spring Clean kits have been provided to individuals organising clean-ups during April & May of this year. Support has also been provided with plans to host beach and neighbourhood cleans with local residents and businesses, within COVID-19 guidelines, in the near future.

My Department also funds and supports the Adopt-A-Spot programme. At present, there are 392 active Adopt-A-Spots across Northern Ireland, with 80 groups on the waiting list for kits due to exceptionally high demand this year. These kits offer practical support to volunteer groups on their clean up journeys, and KNIB is available to provide advice to groups in regards to clean-up events.

Supported by the funding provided by my Department, KNIB regularly liaises with Councils through the 'Live Here, Love Here' (LHLH) initiative. This includes regular interaction to organise waste material collections; promoting media campaigns throughout 10 council areas to address litter issues; increasing awareness of littering Fixed Penalty Notices; and celebrating local initiatives, such as through the "Tales Of The Times" virtual celebration event held in March.

An additional media campaign addressing on-the-go, PPE and beauty spot littering was developed and aired last July as the first lockdown restrictions were easing and litter was becoming an obvious issue once again.

This year, through the Tackling Plastics NI project funded by my Department, coastal schools will receive focused education and help in receiving equipment to prevent litter and pollution at our coasts and in our waterways.

DAERA also provides funding to KNIB 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, which is delivered through a coalition of partners.

My Department appointed KNIB to gather data from all councils on their use of fixed penalty notices for both litter and dog fouling offences. Each council received correspondence requesting feedback on the effectiveness of the current powers and fines. In addition, several councils submitted additional correspondence on these issues directly to me. My officials are reviewing this data to inform the Department's review of the current fixed penalty notice regime which will feed into our first Environment Strategy, which is due to be consulted upon later this year.

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.

At the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, I recognised that continuation of council household waste management services was necessary to safeguard human health and protect the environment. There was, and remains, a need to ensure, that as far as possible, public services continue in a safe and responsible manner. The funding secured from the Executive in this financial year has resulted in a total package to all Councils worth £15.2m to assist with the additional waste costs which have arisen during the pandemic. My Department has worked closely with Council officials, throughout the pandemic, to distribute this allocation across the eleven councils – a significant element of which will assist with tackling additional litter and fly-tipping.

Of course we need to continue extensive collaboration with local councils and other stakeholders on waste management matters to build upon the public's impressive approach to recycling in recent years. The current £23 million Household Waste Recycling Collaborative Change Programme financially supports local councils to further increase recycling rates and improve the quality of recycling. To date, I have made £4.826m available for nine projects. These will not only boost the quality and economic value of recycling but also encourage responsible waste management practices, helping to reduce incidents of littering and fly-tipping.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the investigation into the Meenbog landslide; and for a timeline of the investigation.

**(AQW 17792/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** As I have intimated previously, the Meenbog peat landslide investigation is ongoing, and any comment at this stage would be 'sub judice'.



You will be aware that as the issue originated in the Republic of Ireland, with impact on Northern Ireland territory, this constitutes a cross-border issue for investigation. As such, the Loughs Agency are leading on the investigation and officials in my Department are providing assistance where it is requested.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will bring forward a right to roam policy to give the public greater access to the outdoors.  
(AQW 17794/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** As part of the Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland my department is currently conducting a consultation exercise on "The Provision of Access for Outdoor Recreation in Northern Ireland". We are currently focussing on how a Northern Ireland wide network of paths could be developed, with landowners consent through Permissive Path Agreements.

Initial discussions with the Ulster Farmers Union, outdoor recreation organisations and users of access legislation, such as councils, have been positive. The approach suggests that a solution which will accommodate all parties is possible. However, we are not considering an overall right to roam.

We have recently completed Stage 1 of a two stage formal consultation. Following consideration of the Stage 1 responses, we intend issuing a further consultation (Stage 2) later this year which will invite all members of the public to submit views on this issue.

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the ongoing work to stop the release of noxious gases from Mullaghglass landfill site, Lisburn.  
(AQW 17797/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** NIEA can provide the following update on ongoing work to prevent odorous emissions from Mullaghglass landfill.

In early February, the site operator implemented a number of additional measures to minimise the frequency and level of odour from the site. In addition, site work to install a new steep slope liner was completed in early February; this area was a likely source of site odours in the early part of January.

After three site inspections by NIEA during the month of February, and prior to the most recent scheduled drilling works, the gas management at Mullaghglass Landfill has been brought back into compliance with effect from 23 February 2021.

The operator of Mullaghglass Landfill commenced its scheduled installation of a new phase of gas wells in the recently infilled area of the site on 25 February. These new wells are a necessary component of the site infrastructure, which take place at regular intervals during the lifecycle of the landfill. The new wells have been subsequently connected to the gas extraction system and are being optimised to ensure effective gas collection which provides fuel for the gas engines supplying electricity to the grid.

Elevated levels of odour can occur during such works which requires 'drilling into' the waste. The odour impact is short term and once the new wells are connected to the site's gas management system, these works will bring about a longer term improvement particularly in the post closure phase.

Further work is ongoing at the site to profile this recently infilled area in preparation for its final engineered cap during April / May. This will increase the site area with its final cap from 52% to 65% in May. Regretfully, periodic odours can occur during such works but in the medium / long term, these works will bring about significant improvements, particularly post closure.

The site is entering its last phase of operations and is due to close in the next 12-15 months. Over the coming months, the Operator will continue to install additional gas collection wells and gas infrastructure followed by installing an engineered cap of completed infilled areas.

NIEA regulate this landfill site through its environmental permit and its inspectors are carrying out additional regulatory site inspections and odour monitoring surveys in the area. A revised site Odour Management Plan is in place to ensure that the site is managed in such a way that risk of odour to local communities is minimised as far as practicably possible. Where there are issues at a site, NIEA will direct the operator to resolve these using best available techniques and to ensure that operations remain in compliance with permit conditions.

However, as previously advised, it should be noted that as a 'working landfill' there will always be a risk of periodic odours, however, these should not be sustained.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the clean-up costs incurred by each local council in relation to illegal dumping, in each of the last three years.  
(AQW 17842/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** Currently there is no requirement for a District Council to report the cost incurred by them in the clean-up of illegally dumped wastes to the Department. Therefore, my Department holds no records in that regard.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for an update on pet passports as required for travel between GB and NI, including details involved in their enforcement on 1 July; and (ii) how the public will be made aware of the rules.

**(AQW 17856/17-22)**

**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).

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.

I have also 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.

My Department is currently considering its next steps with regards to any enforcement of compliance with the European Union's requirements for pet travel from GB to NI from 1st July, if required. The present position is set out in the Department's Compliance protocol, available <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/compliance-protocol-sanitary-phytosanitary-controls-and-point-entry-marketing-standards-checks-gb-ni>. However, it is my hope that sensible and pragmatic solutions can be found before then, from the discussions and processes outlined above, which will be to the benefit of all those travelling with pets into NI from GB from 1st July on. In addition, I will continue engagement with Ministerial colleagues to urgently seek derogations where possible from these unnecessary additional requirements.

In order to keep the general public updated, any progress made or flexibilities agreed in respect of the additional requirements, in addition to any changes to the current enforcement of checks, information will be published on the DAERA website <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/travelling-pets>, on the DAERA Frequently Asked Questions document <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/qas-pet-travel-1-january-2021> and communicated widely through our usual Departmental media channels.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the benefit to local communities of Community Benefit Agreements relating to wind farms.

**(AQW 17906/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I would refer the Member to the response for AQW 15288 which was provided on 5 March 2021 by the Department of Economy.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) any active and proposed schemes designed to encourage and assist business diversification among meat and dairy farmers; and (ii) any conversations he has had with farmers and other sectors in relation to this issue.

**(AQW 17935/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** There are two types of farm diversification for which my Department has brought forward investment support:

- 1 Diversification into a different farming activity
- 2 Diversification into a non-farming activity

#### **Diversification into a different farming activity**

The Farm Business Improvement Scheme – Capital (FBIS-C) under the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (NIRDP) is aimed at improving the competitiveness and sustainability of the farming industry. The scheme has two separate tiers: Tier 1 is designed to support small scale investments that will improve the sustainability of farm businesses through the purchase of equipment and machinery, costing from £5,000 to £30,000, from a list of eligible items.

Tier 2 is designed to support larger investments that will enable transformational change in farm businesses across all sectors, which may include diversification into a different farming activity, through projects costing over £30,000 (subject to an overall grant limit of £250,000).

While the FBIS-Capital scheme is currently closed for applications, I am considering what further capital support can be provided under both tiers of the scheme, and within the Future Agricultural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland, which will be launched in the coming months.

Financial support may be available for farm diversification projects from the Agri-Food Co-operation Scheme, also part of the NIRDP, where a farmer would be considering working with others to progress a project. The Agri-Food Co-operation Scheme can provide up to £30,500 of funding along with 50 facilitation days to assist groups of farmers and food producers to progress a new project collaboratively.

Eligible support measures as part of this scheme include Specialist Mentoring, Training, Business Tools, Study Tours and Co-operation Support. The scheme is delivered on behalf of DAERA by Countryside Services Ltd; further details are available on the Countryside Service Ltd website at [www.countrysideservices.com/agri-food-co-operation-scheme/](http://www.countrysideservices.com/agri-food-co-operation-scheme/)

#### **Diversification into a non-farming activity**

The LEADER priority (six) of the NIRDP made investment support available under the Rural Business Investment scheme to assist all rural businesses, including farms, to diversify into a non-farming activity. This scheme is delivered by Local Action Groups (LAGs) across the council areas in Northern Ireland. All LAGs fully allocated their funding in order to deliver projects by 2020.

I have not had any specific conversations with farmers and other sectors in relation to diversification. However, I am aware of the interest in, and benefits which can arise from, business diversification.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what public communications he intends to publish in order to prevent wildfires such as the devastating events of the weekend.

**(AQW 17967/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department and a range of other wildfire stakeholders have issued communications about the risk of wildfires through a wide range of media and other channels. We will continue to raise awareness through these channels.

The NI Strategic Wildfire Group that I established will also be considering the Theme of engagement as part of their work going forward.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail plans for the deployment of NI Environment Agency litter enforcement branch, or others, at popular visitor destinations under his Department's remit such as Crawfordsburn Country Park and Helen's Bay for periods of good weather and during the upcoming summer months.

**(AQW 17972/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department has no NI Environment Agency litter enforcement branch and furthermore has no legislative power of enforcement on matters around littering. As prescribed in the Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994, responsibility for the enforcement of matters relating to litter on relevant land rests with the local council and requires appropriate action from this body.

Responsibility for enforcement rests solely with Ards and North Down Borough Council. I would welcome your engagement with the local council in order to prioritise this issue and take the matter forward. More robust enforcement may be needed in order to properly regulate this issue.

I am keen to see more being done to tackle the scourge of litter across Northern Ireland. DAERA is currently finalising Northern Ireland's first overarching Environment Strategy which will include consideration of new options to tackle littering and the outcome of my Department's recent review of Fixed Penalty Notices for littering offences.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs following the recent incident on Millisle beach, whether sufficient staffing resources and procedures are in place within his Department to deal with diesel spills.

**(AQW 17975/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Diesel and other fuel oil spills can and do occur at any time and from a wide range of locations ranging from domestic properties, garage forecourts, road traffic accidents to spills from large commercial properties and from vessels at sea. In 2020, NIEA staff responded to 149 confirmed water pollution incidents involving the spillage of a variety of oil types. The level of Departmental intervention and response depends upon the volume of oil spilled, the type of product involved, the location and the potential environmental impact.

All oil spills are investigated under the Water (NI) Order 1999 and staff are trained and conduct exercises on the deployment of pollution counter-measures and to manage incidents until fully resolved. Formal external training, by professionally accredited providers, has also been provided for a number of key staff to full Maritime and Coastguard Agency Oil Spill Response Executive Commander Level for large marine spills.

Staffing is a finite resource and the ability to respond to any incident outside of normal working hours is reduced and this may in some cases impact upon the speed of response depending upon commitments to other incidents ongoing at the same time.

The Northern Ireland Coastal Contingency plan sets out a tiered approach which identifies the appropriate response capability in terms of expertise and resources for coastal incidents of different magnitudes and complexity. Whilst the

Department has the capability to deal with the vast majority of oil spills reported, it is not resourced in terms of staff and equipment to 'clean up' particularly large or complex spills. In this regard NIEA will investigate and manage the incident but where necessary, specialist accredited contractors may need to be engaged.

The costs associated with large spills can be substantial and where the source of the oil is known to investigatory staff, the individual or organisation believed to be responsible would be asked to engage a 'clean up' contractor in line with the polluter pay' principle. In all cases the first response of NIEA is to prevent the worsening of the situation and the Department will engage an appropriate contractor and bear the costs if a polluter is not found.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the total area burnt by wildfires, in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 18023/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department does not hold this information.

However I can confirm, as I reported in the Assembly on 26 April 2021, that Forest Service staff attended 22 fire incidents in 2020. As a result of those incidents, 70 hectares of forest and over 110 hectares of peatland were burnt.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline by-laws made to date under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

**(AQW 18064/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The following byelaw was made under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985:

- Strangford Lough Regulation of Anchoring, Mooring and Diving Byelaws 2012. Further information can be found at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doe/marine-legislation-strangford-anchoring-mooring-diving-byelaws-2012.pdf>

**Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for her assessment of the (i) short term; and (ii) medium term impact on air quality and pollution to Ballymoney town and the wider district from the fire at a business in the town on 27 April 2021.

**(AQW 18092/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** There are 21 permanent air quality monitoring sites across Northern Ireland, which measure a variety of gasses and particles. Pollutants measured include nitrogen dioxide, particulate matter, sulphur dioxide and ground level ozone. The air quality monitoring stations closest to Ballymoney are located in Ballymena (Antrim Road and Ballykeel). There are two other Air Quality monitoring stations relatively nearby. (Dungiven and Newtownabbey)

Department Officials continually review levels of pollutants on a daily basis, and on Tuesday the 27th April as a response to becoming aware of the fire at the Tyre Depot, particular attention was paid to reviewing air quality in that region throughout that afternoon. Elevated levels of pollutants were not recorded at any of these sites. However, the monitoring network in Northern Ireland was developed for the purpose of ensuring compliance with EU air quality Directives and subsequently supplemented by sites measuring nitrogen dioxide at 10 roadside locations for the purposes of assessment of the Programme for Government air quality indicator. The monitoring network was not designed to detect elevated concentrations of pollutants on a local scale across all of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the measures being taken to address the problem of illegal dumping from Harmony Bridge at Glenside Park, Belfast into the Forth River.

**(AQO 1976/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** At our meeting at Harmony Bridge on 26 April, I was disheartened to see the conditions that local residents are forced to put up with because of the thoughtless actions of those with no concerns for either their neighbours or the environment.

I understand that difficulties in establishing land ownership for the Bridge and its access are hindering efforts to find a long-term solution to the problem. With this in mind, I have instructed my officials to convene an inter-agency meeting with colleagues from the PSNI, Belfast City Council and Department for Infrastructure, amongst others. I will keep you informed of the outcome of this meeting.

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many incidents of water pollution have been reported in each year since 2017.

**(AQO 1978/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Reports of water pollution received by my Department are as follows:

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021 Q1	Total
Reports	1906	1794	1754	1960	516	7930

Each report was investigated in person by officials of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency within my Department.

The data for 2021 comprises quarter one (January to March) figures due to validation and internal audit requirements.

**Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the North Antrim Hills Wildlife and Conservation Project.

**(AQO 1988/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The member visited this area with me last July and we both understand the potential in the project for my Department to work with local landowners to sustainably manage the area, particularly in relation to managing the threat of wildfire. The threat of wildfire has been made particularly apparent with the dry weather this spring, and the recent major fire in the Mourne.

I can report that following our meeting, my Department has been able to support the North Antrim Hills Wildlife and Conservation Project with both advice and funding. The Project involves 8 landowners owning 1500 ha of land designated as an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) and as part of the Antrim Hills Special Protection Area (SPA) for breeding Hen Harrier and Merlin, and for blanket bog habitat. The work for 2020/21 has just been completed and tendering to complete a comprehensive Wildfire Management Plan is about to be initiated.

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the establishment of an all-island register of persons convicted of the abuse of animals.

**(AQO 1987/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I remain open to the possibility of creating a central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences and my officials have been exploring the matter further at my request.

However, the complexities and data sharing issues pertaining to the establishment of a Northern Ireland register would need to be fully scoped before any consideration could be given to the creation of an all island register.

As the creation of a Northern Ireland register is a cross-cutting issue, I met with the Minister of Justice on 27 April to seek her views on the matter. Given the complexities involved, it was agreed that my officials will work with colleagues in the Department of Justice, and engage with animal welfare organisations, to explore the options available for the creation of a Northern Ireland register, and develop proposals on a way forward.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the action taken by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to clean up the diesel spill at Millisle Beach.

**(AQO 1986/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** On Saturday 17 April 2021 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 and identified an outfall from a culverted stream which was polluted by diesel flowing onto the beach. Absorbent booms were installed to contain the oil. The source of the leak was located and stopped. A specialist oil spill contractor was appointed to undertake a clean up. It has not yet been established how much fuel escaped from the premises.

NIEA along with Marine & Fisheries Division (MFD) officers have continued to monitor the situation on the ground since the spill.

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his plans to address the reduction in recycling as set out in his Department's Local Authority Collected Municipal Waste Management Statistics reports.

**(AQO 1985/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I have noted the reduction in the recycling performance as highlighted in the recent Northern Ireland waste management statistics. I am aware the impact that Covid has had in delivering essential waste management services and maintaining recycling rates. Nevertheless I remain committed to maintaining the progress that we had made on recycling in Northern Ireland prior to Covid, and achieving the recycling and landfill diversion targets particularly in relation to the circular economy.

My department has made available £23 million funding through the Household Waste Recycling Collaborative Change Programme which financially supports local councils to further increase recycling rates and improve the quality of recycling. To date, I have made £4.826m available for nine projects. Following a recent review of the Programme to ensure that it is achieving maximum value for money, I have set matched funding contributions from local councils at 50%. This will allow more councils to take forward their projects, ensure that the funding provided by DAERA can assist more projects and benefit local communities through increased and better quality recycling and reducing landfill.

My department also issued a discussion paper on Future Recycling and Separate Collection of Waste of a Household Nature in Northern Ireland. It put forward proposals on how to improve consistency, quantity and quality of recycling in Northern Ireland. The responses to the paper will help to develop future recycling policy and a Summary of Responses is currently being prepared, this will be available on the DAERA website in due course.

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.

Officials from the Department continue to engage frequently with local councils on a range of waste management issues, including recycling rates, and a task and finish group has recently been established to examine ways to address the recent reduction in recycling rates.

**Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs given the recommendation by the Climate Change Committee of moving to carbon net zero by 2050, to outline the impact on food production of achieving net zero before this date.

**(AQO 1984/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** In publishing the 6th Carbon Budget, in December 2020, the Climate Change Committee (CCC) acknowledged that NI had the highest proportion of its emissions emanating from agriculture, compared with the other UK devolved administrations, and that NI is a significant net exporter of agri-food products with nearly 50% of all agri-food products produced in Northern Ireland consumed in the rest of the UK.

In the various scenarios constructed by the CCC, in which the UK reaches net zero by 2050, it was not possible for NI to also achieve net zero in the same year. As such, and within the balanced pathway scenario, it is recommended that NI aims for at least an 82% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

Such a reduction is seen as an equivalent effort and a fair contribution to the overall UK net zero target. To help achieve this, officials are currently assessing the recommendation of the CCC report, looking at improving our low-carbon farming practices as well as improving the carbon foot print of our food production sector through innovative research and policies such as increased efficiency and the reduction of food waste.

While work is ongoing to assess the full impacts of the CCC recommendation on food production, it is not envisaged that there will be a detrimental impact on food production in Northern Ireland in terms of the UK achieving net zero by 2050, though like other sectors the food production sector will be asked to reduce net emission levels.

## Department for Communities

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the (i) number; and (ii) location of new social housing units planned for South Antrim over the next five years.

**(AQW 17578/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):** The Social Housing Development Programme 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 detailed the social housing units programmed to start as part of the SHDP 2020/21 – 2022/23, listed by Parliamentary Constituency, then Onsite Year.

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, in the South Antrim Parliamentary Constituency**

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
South Antrim	Connswater	181 Ballyclare Road	Newtownabbey	14	2020/21	2022/23
South Antrim	Connswater	181 Ballyclare Road	Newtownabbey	3	2020/21	2022/23
South Antrim	Rural	Main Street	Doagh	6	2020/21	2021/22
South Antrim	Rural	99-101 Main Street	Randalstown	8	2020/21	2021/22
South Antrim	Triangle	31 Belfast Road	Antrim	8	2020/21	2022/23
South Antrim	Triangle	31 Belfast Road	Antrim	18	2020/21	2022/23
South Antrim	Choice	Stiles Way	Antrim	26	2021/22	2023/24
South Antrim	Choice	Stiles Way	Antrim	4	2021/22	2023/24
South Antrim	Choice	Stiles Way	Antrim	3	2021/22	2023/24
South Antrim	Clanmil	Deerpark Hotel	Antrim	23	2021/22	2022/23

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
South Antrim	Clanmil	Deerpark Hotel	Antrim	11	2021/22	2022/23
South Antrim	Clanmil	Deerpark Hotel	Antrim	1	2021/22	2022/23
South Antrim	Connswater	208 Ballyduff Road	Newtownabbey	6	2021/22	2022/23
South Antrim	Radius	5, 7, 9 Riverside	Antrim	16	2021/22	2023/24
South Antrim	Rural	Ballysavage Road	Parkgate	10	2021/22	2023/24
South Antrim	Rural	Ballysavage Road	Parkgate	4	2021/22	2023/24

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the reasons for the delay in completing the work to restore the shop owned by the Housing Executive at the Kilcooley Square, Bangor.

**(AQW 17599/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive has advised that the property at 1 Kilcooley Square was badly damaged, meaning that extensive work is required to bring the building up to standard. The 'Clear Out' work has now been completed and the fire safety report has been received. The report has identified the requirement of additional substantial work to make the building fire compliant. The final costings to complete the necessary works are currently going through the appropriate internal approvals process. Once this approval has been granted, a date can be agreed for the commencement of works which is anticipated to be within a matter of weeks.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities how many public sector homes have been completed in each month since March 2019.

**(AQW 17649/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** In the table below I have provided details of the number of social housing completions recorded as part of the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) during the period April 2019 to March 2021, broken down by month.

Month	Social Housing Completions
Apr-19	79
May-19	122
Jun-19	141
Jul-19	223
Aug-19	114
Sep-19	34
Oct-19	281
Nov-19	14
Dec-19	69
Jan-20	272
Feb-20	174
Mar-20	103
Apr-20	129
May-20	9
Jun-20	17
Jul-20	151
Aug-20	121
Sep-20	58
Oct-20	99
Nov-20	86
Dec-20	324

Month	Social Housing Completions
Jan-21	38
Feb-21	49
Mar-21	223
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,930</b>

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the amount of funding provided for youth workers in Coleraine in each of the last five years.[R]  
(AQW 17854/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** My Department has provided funding through the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund for youth workers in Coleraine in each of the last five years as noted in the table below.

Project	20/21	19/20	18/19	17/18	16/17
Focus on Family - Ballysally Integrated Nurturing Project	£60,150.68	£58,790.69	£54,690.62	£55,223.83	£58,420.08

## Department of Education

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Education to detail in what format the multi-disciplinary teams are meeting to assess children for Autism.  
(AQW 16383/17-22)

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** Whilst COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the delivery of autism assessments for children, I am aware that multi-disciplinary teams within our Trusts have been working diligently, both nationally and internationally, to identify alternative methods of delivering assessments for children which is compliant to NICE Guidelines, whilst still adhering to public health guidelines and social distancing restrictions. Clinicians have continued collating case histories and providing support and interventions for those families awaiting assessment through telephone consultation sessions or the use of technology, based on a case by case basis and the individual needs of children and families involved. Clinicians were, for a period of time, unable to conduct the observational element of assessment, Autism Diagnostic Observational Schedule (ADOS), as a result of the restrictions and the impact of PPE on the individual being assessed. This would render the assessment invalid. However, alternative methods of deploying this aspect of assessment have now been implemented by multi-disciplinary teams through the use of technology and also by securing additional accommodation to enable socially distanced observational assessments to be undertaken and ensure all public health guidelines are adhered to.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) all requests for temporary variation in enrolment by schools, including numbers for the 2021/2022 academic year; and (ii) the number of additional places granted by school for the 2021/2022 academic year.  
(AQW 17385/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Details of Temporary Variation (TV) requests received to date for admission to primary and post-primary schools for the 2021/22 school year are set out in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. I had already approved a number of additional places at Year 8 in advance of the post-primary process commencing and these are set out in Table 3.

**Table 1: Primary School Temporary Variation Admissions Requests for 2021/22 processed as at 27 April 2021**

School Ref	School Name	Admissions Places Requested	Admissions Number – Places Approved	Revised Admissions Number
103-0868	St Anne's PS, Belfast	1	1	121
103-6697	John Paul II PS	9	4	50
201-2344	McClintock PS	2	2	17
201-6152	Enniskillen Model PS	4	4	64
203-2705	St Patrick's PS, Eskra	1	1	13
203-6703	St. Catherine's PS, Strabane	2	1	61
204-6687	Gaelscoil na Daróige	3	3	25



School Ref	School Name	Admissions Places Requested	Admissions Number – Places Approved	Revised Admissions Number
301-0265	Culcrow PS	1	1	18
301-0594	Garryduff PS	2	0	
301-0785	Eden PS	1	1	31
301-0818	Moorfields PS	12	0	
301-0826	The Diamond PS	1	0	
301-0835	Kells & Connor PS	15	15	45
301-0870	Moyle PS	5	5	51
301-2065	Culcrow PS	6	6	17
301-3332	Toreagh PS	5	3	19
301-6052	Harpur's Hill PS	1	0	
301-6129	Carniny PS	1	0	
301-6283	Knockloughrim PS	2	0	
303-0621	St Mary's PS, Portglenone	5	5	34
303-2018	St Brigid's PS, Tirkane	6	6	41
303-2109	New Row PS	1	1	25
303-2246	St John Bosco PS	5	3	20
303-2271	St Eoghan's PS	2	0	
303-2274	St John's PS, Swatragh	8	8	36
303-6666	St Colmcille's PS, Ballymena	1	1	65
303-6704	Mary Queen of Peace PS	9	9	49
306-6652	Maine IPS	1	1	31
401-0743	Largymore PS	1	1	31
401-1567	Ballynahinch PS	3	3	33
401-1699	Moneyrea PS	3	3	32
401-6126	Andrews Memorial PS	1	0	
403-1531	St Francis' PS, Drumaroad	5	5	15
403-1660	St Joseph's PS, Carryduff	5	5	65
403-1676	St Bernard's PS	4	4	64
403-3307	St Colman's PS	1	1	51
403-6146	St Comgall's PS	1	0	
403-6642	St Ita's PS	6	6	96
404-6648	Busncoil Bheanna Boirche	1	1	24
405-1569	Kircubbin Integrated Primary	1	1	24
405-3308	Fort Hill IPS	1	1	31
406-6579	Lough View IPS	1	1	60
404-6600	Scoil na Fuiseoige	1	1	30
406-6668	Drumlins PS	2	2	31
501-0909	Foley PS	4	0	
501-1142	Clare PS	3	0	

School Ref	School Name	Admissions Places Requested	Admissions Number – Places Approved	Revised Admissions Number
501-1174	Birches PS	1	1	30
501-1602	Bleary PS	7	7	27
501-2538	Churchill PS	3	1	13
501-2720	Dungannon PS	11	4	36
501-3702	Woods PS	8	7	30
501-6543	Moyallon PS	1	0	
501-6658	Orchard PS	7	2	25
503-0958	St John's PS Eglisli	6	6	13
503-1080	Clintyclay PS	7	7	14
503-1110	Armagh Christian Brothers' PS	5	5	73
503-1163	St Brigid's PS, Crossmaglen	1	1	31
503-1169	St Brigid's PS, Drumilly	5	5	19
503-1172	St Mary's PS, Granemore	11	11	31
503-1176	St Peter's PS, Cloughreagh	1	0	
503-1653	St Matthew's PS, Magheramayo	1	1	13
503-1694	Holy Cross PS	5	4	24
503-2306	St Malachy's PS, Glencull	6	3	20
503-2591	Roan St Patrick's PS	10	10	22
503-2592	St Mary's PS, Lisbuoy	4	0	
503-6180	St Oliver Plunkett's PS	6	6	23
503-6363	St Mary's PS, Aughnacloy	4	4	16
503-6409	St Ronan's PS	19	18	74
503-6504	St Patrick's PS, Killyman	7	7	105
503-6572	St Colman's PS, Saval	3	3	28
503-6605	St Patrick's PS, Drumgreenagh	2	2	16
503-6673	St Bronagh's PS	1	1	30
504-6137	Seagoe PS	1	1	46
506-6540	Bridge IPS	2	2	60

**Table 2: Post-primary School Temporary Variation Admissions Requests for 2021/22 processed as at 27 April 2021**

School Ref	School Name	Admissions Number - Places Requested	Admissions Number – Places Approved	Revised Admissions Number
141-0270	Wellington College	22	1	111
142-0027	The Royal Belfast Academical Institution	12	0	
142-0029	St Dominc's GS	25	21	162
221-0306	Lisneal College	20	20	198
223-0138	Dean Maguirc	32	32	112
223-0322	St Kevin's College	1	1	101
226-0283	Drumragh Integrated College	28	28	133

School Ref	School Name	Admissions Number - Places Requested	Admissions Number - Places Approved	Revised Admissions Number
242-0052	Thornhill College	11	0	
242-0287	Lumen Christi College	24	0	
321-0035	Magerafelt HS	5	5	105
321-0133	Ballymoney HS	1	1	131
323-0234	St Patrick's College, Maghera	40	14	204
325-0207	Parkhall Integrated College	16	16	166
326-0289	Slemish College	10	10	150
326-0299	Ulidia IC	10	10	110
341-0098	Carrickfergus GS	3	0	
342-0010	St Louis GS, Ballymena	21	6	145
342-0011	Ballymena Academy	18	14	190
342-0012	Dalraida School	7	7	132
342-0058	Rainey Endowed	12	12	112
342-0077	Belfast High School	9	1	137
421-0296	Bangor Academy	8	8	270
426-0255	Lagan College	11	4	204
441-0085	Down HS	10	5	133
442-0051	Wallace HS	3	0	
442-0086	Assumption GS	10	9	129
442-0088	St Patrick's GS, D'patrick	20	10	106
442-0259	Our Lady & St Patrick's College	22	22	212
521-0025	Newtownhamilton HS	4	4	39
521-0083	Markethill HS	7	0	
521-0097	Fivemiletown College	5	5	74
521-0127	Rathfriland HS	3	3	69
523-0135	St Mark's HS, Warrenpoint	15	15	165
523-0157	St Paul's HS, Bessbrook	14	8	253
523-0167	St Joseph's HS, Crossmaglen	4	4	124
523-0187	St Patrick's HS, Keady	9	2	162
523-0218	St Catherine's College	27	23	175
523-0321	St John the Baptist's College	4	4	104
526-0285	New-Bridge Integrated College	7	7	107
526-0286	Integrated College Dungannon	20	20	130
541-0013	Banbridge Academy	8	8	192
542-0073	St Joseph's GS, Donaghmore	34	34	148

**Table 3: Additional Year 8 places 2021/22**

School Ref	School Name	Parliamentary Constituency	Approved Admissions Number	Number of Additional Year 8 Places Allocated 2021	2021/22 Approved Admissions Number
1410079	Grosvenor Grammar	Belfast East	155	20	175
1210015	Ashfield Boys High School	Belfast East	110	30	140
1420089	Strathearn College	Belfast East	110	10	120
4420259	Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock	Belfast East	180	10	190
1210014	Ashfield Girls' High School	Belfast East	113	0	113
<b>Total Belfast East</b>				<b>70</b>	
1420030	St Malachy's College Belfast	Belfast North	150	20	170
1420082	Dominican College	Belfast North	150	10	160
1230321	Blessed Trinity	Belfast North	195	10	205
<b>Total Belfast North</b>				<b>40</b>	
1420277	Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School	Belfast South	110	20	130
<b>Total Belfast South</b>				<b>20</b>	
5230293	St Patrick's College	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	100	22	122
5420304	St Patrick's Academy	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	193	15	208
<b>Total Fermanagh &amp; South Tyrone</b>				<b>37</b>	
3420080	St Mary's Grammar School	Mid Ulster - Magherafelt	153	12	165
3230168	St Pius X College	Mid Ulster - Magherafelt	140	30	170
<b>Total Mid Ulster - Magherafelt</b>				<b>42</b>	
3410209	Antrim Grammar School	South Antrim	112	24	136
Total South Antrim				24	
5420062	St Colman's College Newry	Newry & Armagh	125	15	140
5230157	St Paul's High School Bessbrook	Newry & Armagh	215	30	245
5420060	Our Lady's Grammar School	Newry & Armagh	120	28	148
<b>Total Newry &amp; Armagh</b>				<b>73</b>	
5420062	St Colman's College Newry	Newry & Armagh	125	15	140
5230157	St Paul's High School Bessbrook	Newry & Armagh	215	30	245
5420060	Our Lady's Grammar School	Newry & Armagh	120	28	148
<b>Total Newry &amp; Armagh</b>				<b>73</b>	

School Ref	School Name	Parliamentary Constituency	Approved Admissions Number	Number of Additional Year 8 Places Allocated 2021	2021/22 Approved Admissions Number
4210296	Bangor Academy	North Down - Bangor	242	20	262
4420015	Bangor Grammar School	North Down - Bangor	125	10	135
4230107	St Columbanus' College	North Down - Bangor	115	15	130
<b>Total North Down</b>				<b>45</b>	
4210063	Saintfield High School	Strangford	68	4	72
4410063	Regent House School	Strangford	210	0	210
4210012	Movilla High School	Strangford	120	0	120
4210045	Nendrum	Strangford	80	0	80
4210046	Glastry College	Strangford	110	6	116
4260295	Strangford Integrated College	Strangford	110	0	110
<b>Total Strangford</b>				<b>10</b>	
<b>Total Additional places</b>				<b>361</b>	

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) his assessment of Pathological Demand Avoidance training not currently being mandatory for primary and post-primary teachers; and (ii) what support is currently available in schools for pupils who have PDA.

**(AQW 17623/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Mandatory training is not in line with the Department's Teacher Professional Learning Strategy - Learning Leaders (2016) (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/teaching-professional-learning-strategy>) which aims to empower the teaching profession to strengthen its own professionalism and expertise to meet the challenging educational needs of young people in the 21st century.

The Education Authority Autism Advisory and Intervention Service (EA AAIS) do not currently provide training or advice on Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) as there is no standard agreement amongst professionals on intervention strategies or categorisation of the condition at present. PDA, also referred to as extreme demand avoidance, is not a recognised diagnostic category within the existing international diagnostic classification systems. As this is a medical diagnosis, EA AAIS will continue to follow guidance and take the lead from the Department of Health.

If there is a diagnosis of PDA, the EA AAIS recommend that this is also accompanied by a treatment plan, from the health professional involved, to outline the support that the school can provide for individual pupils.

Training on autism and anxiety for Parents and Professionals may be useful for children and young people presenting with these difficulties. Parental guidance and resources are available via the EA AAIS (<https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services/autism-advisory-intervention-service-aais>) or through Middletown Centre for Autism (<https://www.middletownautism.com/>)

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Education to detail the youth work initiatives his Department has facilitated in order to reach the most vulnerable and hard to reach young people in each of the past five years in (i) East Londonderry; and (ii) Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 17624/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** I have arranged for this information to be placed in the Assembly Library.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Education what guidance he is giving to schools concerning where pupils should be during study leave after GCSE exams this year.

**(AQW 17641/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** In normal circumstances pupils in Years 12-14 would begin study leave during the summer term in preparation for public examinations. It remains a matter for schools to decide in their own context, the best approach for these pupils during the current Summer Term. This recognises the need for flexibility for schools and also the potential difficulty engaging some pupils following the completion of their qualifications.

However, on 22 March 2021, my Department issued advice to all schools, to encourage them to teach pupils in Years 12 to 14 for as long as possible. In particular, my Department has strongly recommended that pupils in Year 13 continue to be taught in school until the end of the Summer Term. These pupils are mid A Level course and a significant amount of face-to-face learning has been lost. Again, given the context of two periods of extended remote learning, my Department has advised schools to consider enrichment activities or taster sessions for pupils in Years 12 to 14 during June and following the submission of Centre Determined Grades for their GCSE and A Level qualifications.

You will also note that the dates for the submission of Centre Determined Grades to CCEA are 21 May for A Levels and 4 June for GCSEs. These dates have been designed to maximise face-to-face teaching for Years 12 to 14 whilst allowing time for CCEA moderation of the grades submitted by schools.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education how many educational psychologists are working in the Education Authority.  
(AQW 17837/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The number of educational psychologists currently working in the Education Authority (EA) and employed by the EA in the previous four years is as follows:

Year	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Number of Educational Psychologists employed	161	144	148	134	126
Full Time Equivalent	136	118	128.9	106.42	101.9

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education to outline how many educational psychologists have been employed by the Education Authority in each of the last five years.

(AQW 17840/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The number of educational psychologists currently working in the Education Authority (EA) and employed by the EA in the previous four years is as follows:

Year	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Number of Educational Psychologists employed	161	144	148	134	126
Full Time Equivalent	136	118	128.9	106.42	101.9

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education why there is no Education Authority Numeracy Support Service for children with special educational needs in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17863/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Although there is currently no standalone 'Numeracy Support Service' within the Education Authority (EA), pupils' needs are assessed and supported across a range of individually-tailored school-based interventions at Stages 1 & 2 of the current Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs [1998], and the wider range of pupil support services at Stages 3 and beyond.

All of the EA's pupil support services are undergoing fundamental review as part of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Strategic Development Programme, with a view to developing an integrated support model tailored around the pupil, rather than structured as separate standalone services. Stakeholder opinion and evidence of needs in terms of numeracy support will be factored into that review process and appropriately addressed in its recommendations.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Education to confirm (i) whether he has engaged with principals regarding their well-being; (ii) how he will address issues or concerns they have raised as a result of COVID-19; and (iii) how he plans to look after those principals who have lead in their school community and local community generally.

(AQW 17907/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** A Practitioners Group (PG) was established as part of the Education Restart and COVID Response and is tasked with the consideration of practical issues and the development of proposed operational solutions.

Membership of the PG comprises of school principals from across the education sector, Public Health Agency, and Education Authority staff. The PG has been involved in the development of guidance on practical arrangements for schools throughout the pandemic and has helped to inform decisions made.

Through this forum, principals are able to raise any issues/concerns in relation to their wellbeing or everyday school issues at an early stage.

To ensure a full response to this question input has also been sought from the Education Authority (EA) and its comments have been reproduced below.

DE funding has facilitated an EA multipronged approach to supporting the Health and Wellbeing of school leaders and their communities, informed by Principal voice. All programmes support the DE Wellbeing Policy and the EA Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

- EA, in partnership with DE, are providing a Coaching Service for School Leaders to support Principal wellbeing, through access to individual coaching sessions. The extension of this programme, and a resilience-building programme for all staff designed by EA in collaboration with Inspire, is now available to help Principals manage the wellbeing needs of their school communities.
- Through the DE EA Restart programme, a dedicated Health and Wellbeing section on the EA Portal was developed.
- School leaders have been offered a range of opportunities, some with a direct focus on Health and Wellbeing such as the Barry Carpenter, 'Recovery Curriculum' programme, and others, which indirectly support wellbeing, such as the 'Leadership Matters Achieve', programme with Andy Buck designed in collaboration with EA to empower school leaders.
- A Cross Organisational Link Officer (COLO) was assigned to every school; their role is to support Principals with operational queries to alleviate stress and anxiety. The COLO is also a 'listening ear', providing pastoral support. In addition, coupled with the 'Daily Queries' form, established alongside the COLO, Principals have a direct avenue to inform the system of successes, anxieties and areas of need or for further development allowing for amendments or updates to guidance materials to be identified and actioned.
- DE provided funding of £5m to the EA for onward allocation to schools to support both pupil and staff wellbeing. Schools were asked to engage with staff and pupils as to how best to use the money and as a result, staff have been supported through this funding.

In addition a Health and Wellbeing Strategy for all staff employed by the Education Authority has been developed and a programme to support health and wellbeing is in place. The Strategy was launched in January 2020 and school leaders were consulted as part of its development through the facilitation of 4 sessions over two days in the East and West of Northern Ireland. These sessions were well attended and some school leaders subsequently were involved in the launch of the Strategy and in the short video promoting the Strategy to schools.

A programme to support wellbeing is in place and in (2020/21) this included:

- 180 health and wellbeing sessions/ initiatives/ campaigns provided online for EA staff.
- EA HealthWell Hub development. "The hub" was fast-tracked in late March 2020 to meet the immediate needs of staff during the early stages of the pandemic period. The Hub now has over 19k users and 36k active sessions since inception.
- Over 87.5k programme related views (over 60k unique views).
- Increased catalogue of pre-recorded H&W sessions are available 24/7 with 22 distinct courses.
- Programme evaluation are trending at an 80% satisfaction rating overall.
- Notably higher levels of engagement and participation in the programme relating to staff in schools in 2020/21.
- For example over 50% of delegates who engaged in the sessions linked to the theme of supporting Healthy Minds at work were school based staff.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education (i) how coding is taught in the Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 curriculum: and (ii) what consideration has been given to introducing Web Design and Development as an option at GCSE.  
(AQW 17938/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Using ICT is one of the three cross-curricular skills at the heart of the curriculum and teachers can measure standards of pupil competency in digital skills through this.

Pupils develop their technical skills in a range of different types of ICT, including coding. The curriculum requirements for Using ICT are set out under the 5 'E's: Explore, Express, Exchange, Evaluate and Exhibit. These apply to all pupils in primary school, from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 2. Part of 'Explore' is that pupils should: "investigate, make predictions and solve problems through interaction with digital tools." Schools can cover this element either through graphs, spreadsheets, databases; and/or coding and computational thinking.

The CCEA Digital Skills Framework for Key Stage 3 takes the concepts behind three broad tiers of digital skills and applies them to the context of a learner within a school setting. Coding is one of the essential skills which teaches pupils how to solve problems and work together. It allows pupils to control digital technology and create exciting applications. When developing coding skills at Key Stage 3, schools are encouraged to provide pupils with opportunities to solve a variety of computational problems.

CCEA has created a suite of resources which provide a progression pathway for coding in the classroom and provide teachers with practical online teaching and learning materials. CCEA has been working in collaboration with a range of industry partners to ensure that the resources are reflective of current industry practice, ensuring that the learning is relevant to today's standards. These resources ensure our young people have the necessary skills to flourish in a digital world and provide excellent opportunities for learners to progress to CCEA's GCSE in Digital Technology and GCE in Software Systems Development.

At Key Stage 4 'Web Design and Development' is an option, through the Multimedia (Route A) part of the CCEA GCSE Digital Technology specification.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Education (i) whether his Department is aware of UNISON's current free school meals for all campaign; (ii) for his assessment of the campaign; and (iii) whether plans are being drafted to implement its recommendations.

**(AQW 18007/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:**

- (i) Whilst I have had no direct contact with Unison, I am aware of their campaign for Free School Meals for all children in school.
- (ii) 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. The Unison campaign to provide free school meals to all pupils, regardless of need, would represent a significant departure from current policy and result in a substantial increase in the cost of providing free school meals.
- (iii) The Covid-19 pandemic has brought into focus the number of children experiencing food insecurity and 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 review will consider all options including the option to provide universal free school meals to all pupils or certain year groups of pupils. In developing proposals the review team will consult widely with stakeholders including trade unions.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Education why his Department did not seek any funding to assist in marking of the centenary of Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18045/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The UK Government has made a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) document to work with the Executive to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021, and to make available funding for related projects. While I will participate in Executive discussions with the Secretary of State about the implementation of the UK Government's commitment to support and fund projects, no funds have yet been secured by my Department, as the quantum and method of allocation have not yet been determined.

The Department of Finance had commissioned an exercise requesting that departments submit bids to the NDNA unique circumstances financial package of £40 million across the next four years. My Department submitted bids for funds in relation to 14 proposals (totalling £23.9m over the four year period). 4 of these proposals (totalling £675k in 2021-22) were directly or indirectly aimed at assisting schools in marking the centenary. The outcome of this exercise is yet to be finalised.

All of this will be in addition to any funding that may be considered from within the Department of Education's Resource Budget to mark the centenary.

**Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether outdoor singing in groups is permissible and also as an after-school activity.

**(AQW 18048/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Due to the increased prevalence of the Kent variant (B.1.1.7) of the COVID-19 virus and on the advice of the CMO and the Public Health Agency (PHA), singing was temporarily suspended, as stated in my letter of 1 April. 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 singing presented a potential enhanced increase of transmission of the new variant. It was, however, permissible to continue in an outdoor setting.

The Education Authority met with the PHA to review its guidance and updated its Music Unlocked Guidance for Schools on 16 April to reinforce the guidance on planning and risk assessing the provision of singing within schools. The guidance states that singing outdoors may be considered as long as the singers and leader are aware of the wind direction and appropriate social distancing and other mitigation measures are 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 included 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 Frew** asked the Minister of Education whether secondary schools can commence all extra-curricular/after-school activity.

**(AQW 18049/17-22)**



**Mr Weir:** Following engagement with the Chief Medical Officer, the Public Health Agency, 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 included the provision of care before and after school, for example, for the provision of breakfast clubs and after-school care such as homework clubs.

Outdoor extra-curricular sports is permitted (not inter-school sports), but indoor or outdoor extra-curricular activities provided by school such as after schools clubs, remain paused. 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.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to publish guidance (i) for referral paths in schools; and (ii) on how schools should run counselling services efficiently and discreetly.  
**(AQW 18067/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Education Authority (EA) has full contract and operational management responsibilities for the Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS).

As part of the contract specification, the EA has updated the ICSS Handbook (the Handbook) which provides guidance and information for young people about the counselling service. The Handbook explains the referral pathway. Referrals can be made by young people themselves, a parent/carer or a teacher. Young people can submit an online/email self-referral or speak with the school Key Contact teacher to request a referral.

The Handbook also provides guidance on the role of all the partners involved in the provision of school counselling for young people including the school management team and the school Key Contact teacher. The role of the Key Contact is to promote the school counselling service, hold and manage the waiting list, assist in the scheduling of counselling sessions, meet with the counsellor on a weekly basis and take appropriate action on child protection referrals. More information on these roles are on pages 12 and 20 of the Handbook.

Further information and access to the Handbook is available at: [Counselling | Education Authority Northern Ireland \(eani.org.uk\)](https://eani.org.uk)

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education whether he will include student stakeholders in decision making; and how his decisions affect students' experiences.  
**(AQW 18068/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** I recognise the importance of seeking and listening to the views of children and young people on key decisions which affect them. This is integral to how my Department operates as demonstrated below:

Alternative Awarding Arrangements for examinations in 2021 and 2022

Officials have engaged with representative groups of students in schools to ascertain their opinions and feedback on the alternative awarding arrangements. Furthermore, officials met with the Secondary Students Union (NI) to listen to their views on awarding arrangements. Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has also engaged with the Children's Commissioner's Youth Panel to help inform the advice provided to the Department on qualifications and examinations.

Engagement with children and young people during the pandemic

At my request the Education Authority used its 'My Voice' programme to seek and listen to the views of a significant number of children and young people to inform and support decision making for the Education Restart programme and assist in the development of relevant guidance. This engagement work with children and young people is ongoing.

Development of Children and Young People's Participation Network

DE officials are currently working in partnership with Education Authority (EA) Youth Services staff and other children's authorities on the 'Young People's Participation in Decision Making' project. The project aims to establish an inclusive network supporting children and young people to provide their views to government on policy development and decision making which impact on their lives. The project board, which includes a youth panel, is examining options for the proposed network which will be brought forward for my consideration in due course.

Participation within schools

While the Department recognises the value of all forms of pupil participation and the important contribution these can make in supporting pupils as key stakeholders and decision-makers within their schools, it is a matter for individual schools to identify the method and degree of participation which best suits the needs of their pupils and to find meaningful ways to ensure their voice is heard.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to introduce mental health awareness training into teacher training courses.  
**(AQW 18069/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers already include mental health and wellbeing in a number of ITE modules.

I should also add that the ITE providers review their programmes every year to take into account any significant changes to the educational landscape, and will do so with regards to the new Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework, which was launched by the Department on 26 February 2021. This will ensure student teachers continue to receive appropriate development in this important area.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the work by his Department to review current provision of Relationship and Sexuality Education in our schools, including a review of the Minimum Content Order.  
(AQW 18126/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Any changes to the Minimum Content Order would require significant and extensive consultation with key stakeholders to ensure that there is a sound evidence base on which to make decisions on this issue. It would also need to safeguard the current flexibility in the curriculum and ensure that it is not unintentionally narrowed or reduced. Set against other priorities and allowing for the development of proposals for change and consulting on them will mean that this work will not be completed before the end of this mandate.

My officials are part of the Department of Justice (DoJ) Education and Awareness Working Group which is a cross departmental multi-agency group established to raise awareness and education in Northern Ireland of the issues highlighted in Sir John Gillen's review into the law and procedures in respect of serious sexual offences. As part of this work DoJ officials are in the process of setting up a sub-group of key stakeholders from the main Gillen Implementation Group to consider in detail the educational issues arising from the Review's recommendations with a focus on RSE in the curriculum.

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Education whether he will explore the expansion of Surestart provision in Foyle.  
(AQW 18140/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The Sure Start programme is delivered via 38 Sure Start projects, in (at least) the 25% most disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland (NI), as measured by the NI Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) 2010; research indicates this is where targeted early intervention can be most effective. Provision is universal within the Sure Start catchment areas, therefore all children under four (and their families) in these areas can access services. Foyle Constituency is served by Shantallow, Edenballymore, Waterside and Little Hands Sure Start projects which can extend their catchment areas where there is need and resource permits.

In light of the impact of the pandemic on many families and to help support communities to recover, I have increased the budget for Sure Start in 2021/22 to temporarily expand provision within strict parameters, based on the 2017 Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure. The HSCB (which administers Sure Start) is currently planning how these limited extended services will be rolled out on a temporary basis within existing Sure Start projects.

A review of DE targeted Early Years interventions, including Sure Start, is scheduled to commence later this year and will include consideration of the geographical scope of provision.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education to outline how many year eight places are available per school, across North Down for the next school term.  
(AQW 18213/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The Year 8 places available for admission to post-primary schools in North Down for the 2021/22 school year are set out in the table below. As the admissions process is ongoing these numbers may be increased by way of Temporary Variation (TV).

School Name	School ref	Admission no.
Bangor Academy & Sixth Form College	421-0296	262
Bangor Grammar School	442-0015	135
Glenlola Collegiate	441-0097	157
Priory Integrated College	425-0024	100
St Columbanus' College	423-0107	130
Sullivan Upper School	442-0044	150

**Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) what guidance his Department has issued to grammar schools regarding the transfer test and alternative arrangements this autumn; and (ii) what engagement has he had with feeder primary schools in order to allow teachers, parents and pupils to prepare.  
(AQW 18259/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I understand that neither test provider, the Association for Quality Education nor the Post Primary Transfer Consortium have yet announced plans for transfer tests this year. Of course any arrangements will have to take account of the public health guidance in place at the time the tests are held. My Department plays no role in the organisation or content of the tests. They are a private arrangement between the test providers and those schools that use the scores of the tests as

part of the selective admissions criteria. As with last year, any alternative arrangements for the tests are a matter for the test providers. Additionally, in the absence of tests, decisions regarding alternative approaches to setting and applying admissions criteria will be a matter for individual Boards of Governors.

I issued guidance to all primary schools in 2016 setting out how they may supply support materials, carry out preparations for tests during core teaching hours, coach in exam technique and familiarise pupils with the test environment. However, that guidance is not prescriptive and it is a matter for individual schools to judge how much core teaching time and other support they devote to preparing pupils for the tests.

**Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Education (i) for his assessment of the total Engage Programme budget; and (ii) whether this is likely to be increased going forward.

**(AQW 18260/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** I am confident that the c£16m of funding provided during this academic year is assisting schools in addressing the effects of the disruption to learning caused by Covid-19. It is allowing them to offer additional help to those pupils most impacted by school closures and remote learning, which will help them to reach their full potential as we emerge from the pandemic that has touched all our lives over the past year.

Given the prolonged impact of Covid-19 across the education system, I intend to continue the programme during the next academic year and broaden it to include pre-school education and other early year's settings, Special schools, and Education Other Than At School settings. As a result I envisage the budget for the programme increasing for the 2021/22 academic year. I have secured funding for the period September 2021 to March 2022 and my officials are working with representatives of the education sector to develop the detail of the programme.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Education to provide (i) a list of settings which would qualify to hold catch-up summer schemes; and (ii) whether he has considered daycare settings.

**(AQW 18276/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** My officials are finalising the policy regarding the offer of a Summer Scheme 2021 and will be contacting schools in May to ask them to confirm if they wish to deliver such a scheme. The programme is voluntary with an emphasis on emotional health and well-being, enjoying outside activities and socialising with friends. It is not about catch up.

Schools will be asked to consider who they may be able to work with in facilitating such a scheme, for example, other schools, local councils, childcare providers, voluntary and community groups in the area and so on, if that is considered appropriate, avoiding duplication where possible.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education following the announcement that there will not be any GCSE and A-Level exams in 2021, to outline his plans to address schools undertaking informal assessments which would put students under unnecessary stress, given that they have not have a proper year of education.

**(AQW 18278/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Public examinations for GCSE, AS and A level qualifications were cancelled as it was not possible to proceed with standardised examinations. To ensure that qualifications can be awarded fairly, schools are required 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. CCEA has provided advice on the types of evidence that might be used to support the determination of grades including, previously completed class tests, previously completed coursework, performance in mock exams, work completed in class or at home including during periods of remote learning, and assessments either set by the school or using the CCEA assessment resources.

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.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of applications received for nursery school places by location in Newry and Armagh; and (ii) the number of children who did not receive their first choice for nursery school in September 2021.

**(AQW 18302/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The admissions process for funded pre-school education places for September 2021 is currently underway. The process for admission to pre-school education provision is preference based, and unfortunately it is not always possible to accommodate everyone's first preference. For this reason, parents are encouraged to list a number of preferences of pre-school settings that they would be happy for their children to attend.

The Education Authority has advised that the tables below provide the outcome of first preference applications received by settings during the first stage of the pre-school education admissions process in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon District Council and the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council areas respectively.

**Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon District Council**

<b>Setting name</b>	<b>Places available</b>	<b>First Preference applications received</b>	<b>First Preference applicants offered a funded place</b>
Aghagallon Pre-School PG (Craigavon) PT	20	17	17
All Saints PS NU (Annaclone) FT	26	24	24
Apple Blossom PG (Eglis) PT	17	17	17
Ballydown PS NU (Banbridge) FT	26	36	26
Ballyoran PS NU FT	52	42	42
Banbridge NS FT	52	52	48
Bocombra PS NU (Portadown) PT	26	43	26
Bronte PS NU (Banbridge) PT	26	23	23
Button Moon PG (Tandragee) PT	23	21	21
Carrick PS NU (Lurgan) FT	52	38	38
CBS Naiscoil na mBraithre Crostai PS NU Armagh FT	26	35	26
Childs Play Pre School PG (Banbridge) PT	26	18	18
Cill Chluana Parish NU at St Mary's PS FT	30	43	30
Clady Tiny Tots PG (Mowhan) PT	33	31	31
College Farm NS FT	52	37	37
Dara Pre School PG (Armagh) PT	26	30	26
Derrytrasna PG (Lurgan) PT	13	12	12
Dickson PS NU (Lurgan) FT	26	18	18
Donacloney PS NU FT	26	26	25
Downshire NS (Banbridge) FT	52	67	52
Dromore NS FT	26	66	26
Dromore NS PT	52	3	3
Drumadonnell PS NU (Banbridge) PT	26	24	24
Drumgor PS NU (Craigavon) FT	52	29	29
Drumnamoe NS (Lurgan) FT	52	100	52
Drumnamoe NS (Lurgan) PT	52	6	6
Earlybird PG (Armagh) PT	20	6	6
Edenderry NS (Portadown) FT	52	49	49
Fair Hill PS NU (Dromara) FT	26	37	26
Gilford PS NU (Craigavon) FT	26	18	18
Grove NS (Armagh) FT	52	47	47
Happy Tots PG (Portadown) PT	15	9	9
Hardy Memorial PS NU (Richhill) PT	52	59	52
Harrison NS (Lurgan) FT	52	56	52
Hart Memorial PS NU (Portadown) FT	52	60	52
Humpty Dumpty Pre School PG (Banbridge) PT	20	5	5
Iveagh PS NU (Newry) (Rathfriland) PT	26	28	26
Jolly Jesters Nursery PG (Dromore) PT	13	6	6

<b>Setting name</b>	<b>Places available</b>	<b>First Preference applications received</b>	<b>First Preference applicants offered a funded place</b>
Keady Com PG (Armagh) PT	24	21	21
King's Park PS NU (Lurgan) FT	78	72	72
Ladybird Lane Pre School PG (Banbridge) PT	16	8	8
Laurencetown Pre School PG (Gilford) PT	23	23	23
Little Acorns PG (Derrymore) PT	19	19	19
Little Acorns PG (Derrynoose) PT	23	21	21
Little Friends Pre School PG (Banbridge) PT	46	32	32
Little Oaks Pre School PG (Portadown) PT	15	7	7
Little Villagers PG (Armagh) PT	24	25	24
Loughbrickland Pre School PG (Banbridge) PT	24	19	19
Loughgall PG PT	22	17	17
Loughshore PG (Dungannon) PT	8	6	6
Lurgan Model PS NU FT	26	23	23
Maralin Village PS NU (Craigavon) FT	26	43	26
Millington NS (Portadown) FT	78	81	78
Naiscoil an Cheide PG (Keady) PT	24	25	24
Naiscoil Chois Locha PG (Lurgan) PT	24	22	22
Naiscoil na Banna PG (Portadown) PT	18	16	16
Naiscoil na Caille PG (Armagh) PT	15	7	7
Naiscoil na Pairce Glaise PG (Armagh) PT	26	11	11
Orchard County PS NU PT	26	27	26
Orchard Pre School PG (Loughgall) PT	22	9	9
Peatlands PG (Portadown) PT	24	30	24
Portadown Integrated PS NU PT	52	62	52
Poyntzpass PG PT	24	29	24
Railway Street NS (Armagh) FT	26	28	27
Rainbow Pre School PG (Dromore) PT	14	10	10
Rainbow Stop PG (Markethill) PT	34	33	32
Rathfriland Pre School PG PT	23	19	19
Saints and Scholars Integrated PS NU FT	28	42	27
Scotwell House PG (Armagh) PT	34	22	22
Seagoe PS NU (Portadown) PT	52	52	51
St Anthony's PS NU (Craigavon) FT	78	70	70
St Brendan's PS NU (Craigavon) FT	52	44	44
St Francis' PS NU (Lurgan) FT	78	81	78
St John the Baptist NS (Portadown) FT	52	45	45
St John's PS NU (Middletown) FT	26	31	26
St Mary's PS NU (Banbridge) FT	26	34	26
St Patrick's PS NU (Aghacommon) FT	26	26	26
St Peter's PG (Collegelands) PT	26	28	26

Setting name	Places available	First Preference applications received	First Preference applicants offered a funded place
Tandragee NS FT	26	62	26
Tandragee NS PT	52	8	8
The Old Station Day Care Nursery PG PT	21	22	21
Tiny Tots Corner PG (Killylea) PT	22	22	22
Trinity Park Pre School Nursery PG (Craigavon) PT	22	8	8
Tullygally PS NU (Craigavon) FT	52	34	34
Waringstown PS NU PT	26	37	26

**Newry, Mourne and Down District Council**

Setting name	Places available	First Preference applications received	First Preference applicants offered a funded place
Academy Nursery School PS NU (Saintfield) PT	60	65	60
Annalong PS NU (Newry) FT	26	31	26
Apple Blossom Pre School PG (Downpatrick) PT	24	25	24
Ardglass Pre School PG PT	26	17	17
Ashgrove NS (Newry) PT	52	38	38
Atticall PG (Kilkeel) PT	24	11	11
Ballykinlar Cross Community Pre School Ltd PG PT	12	10	10
Ballynahinch PS NU FT	26	22	22
Bessbrook PS NU (Newry) FT	26	18	18
Busy Bees Pre School PG (Burren) PT	23	15	15
Carrick Pre School PG (Warrenpoint) PT	26	27	25
Castlewellan Community PG PT	22	15	12
Cedar Integrated PS NU (Crossgar) PT	26	21	21
Clonduff PG (Newry) PT	45	45	45
Convent of Mercy NS (Downpatrick) FT	52	35	35
Dominican @ Early Years PG (Newry) PT	12	12	12
Downpatrick NS FT	26	36	26
Drumaness Cross Community PG PT	20	20	20
Dundrum Cross Community PG PT	20	12	12
Dunnaman Children's Centre PG PT	19	23	19
Forkhill Pre School PG PT	19	15	15
Giggles Day Care PG (Newry) PT	19	19	19
Glasswater Pre School PG (Down) PT	13	13	13
Glenn and Barr PG (Newry) PT	24	31	23
Happy Faces Day Care Nursery PG (Newry) PT	44	36	36
Jolly Tots PG (Mayobridge) PT	18	11	11
Kids Kabin Cross Community PG (Castlewellan) PT	16	12	12
Kidzone PG (Newry) PT	17	6	6
Kilkeel NS FT	26	75	26

Setting name	Places available	First Preference applications received	First Preference applicants offered a funded place
Kilkeel NS PT	52	12	12
Kilkeel PG PT	23	20	20
Killeen Playschool PG PT	19	15	15
Killough PG (Downpatrick) PT	15	14	14
Killyleagh Integrated PS NU (Downpatrick) PT	26	12	12
Kingdom PG (Kilkeel) PT	17	14	14
Leitrim Community PG (Castlewellan) PT	17	11	11
Little Explorers Nursery PG PT	9	8	8
Little Folk PG (Newry) PT	24	21	21
Little People Pre School Centre PG PT	17	16	16
Little Sunbeams Pre School & PG (Ballynahinch) PT	24	15	15
Littleones Day Nursery PG (Downpatrick) PT	8	6	6
Loughinisland Cross Com PG (Downpatrick) PT	21	18	18
Lower Mourne Pre School PG (Annalong) PT	15	12	12
Magheradroll PS NU (Ballynahinch) PT	52	49	49
Meigh Community Pre School PG PT	26	32	26
Naiscoil an Chreagain PG (Crossmaglen) PT	14	10	10
Naiscoil an Iuir PG (Newry) PT	16	16	16
Naiscoil Bheanna Boirche PS NU (Castlewellan) PT	26	19	19
Naiscoil Dhun Padraig PG (Downpatrick) PT	11	11	11
Naiscoil na mBeann PG (Kilkeel) PT	23	19	19
Naiscoil Shliabh gCuilinn PG (Newry) PT	17	15	15
Newcastle Pre School PG PT	18	24	18
Newcastle PS NU PT	52	25	25
Play Links PG (Downpatrick) PT	16	16	16
Rascals 'n' Ruffians PG PT	26	18	18
Rathkeltair Cross Community Pre School PG PT	24	14	14
Rockmount Day Nursery PG PT	24	23	23
Safe and Sound Day Nursery PG (Ballynahinch) PT	20	23	20
Saul Community Pre School PG (Downpatrick) PT	26	28	26
Seaview NS (Warrenpoint) FT	78	101	78
St Clare's Abbey PS NU (Newry) PT	52	52	52
St Colmcille's NS (Downpatrick) FT	52	65	52
St Joseph's Convent PS NU (Newry) FT	52	56	52
St Joseph's PS NU (Bessbrook) FT	52	41	41
St Malachy's NS (Carnagat) FT	52	33	33
St Malachy's PS NU (Camlough) PT	52	41	41
St Malachy's PS NU (Castlewellan) FT	26	40	26
St Malachys PS NU (Kilcoo) PT	26	22	22

Setting name	Places available	First Preference applications received	First Preference applicants offered a funded place
St Mary's PS NU (Mullaghbawn) FT	26	32	26
St Mary's PS NU (Newcastle) PT	52	35	35
St Moninna's PS NU (Newry) FT (Formerly Cloughoge)	52	53	50
St Patrick's PS NU (Crossmaglen) FT	52	54	52
St Patrick's PS NU (Cullyhanna) FT	26	25	25
St Patrick's PS NU (Mayobridge) PT	26	25	25
St Patrick's PS NU (Newry) FT	52	53	51
St Peter's PS NU (Bessbrook) FT	26	53	26
Strawberry Tree PG (Newry) PT	26	30	26
Teconnaught Cross Community Pre School PG PT	26	29	26
Tiny Toons Community PG (Downpatrick) PT	8	7	7
Windmill PG (Newry) PT	11	6	6

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 17307/17-22, (i) to detail how the recurrent funding of £5 million is being or will be spent, and (ii) what economic assessment will be undertaken.

**(AQW 18319/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** £5m recurrent funding has been made available to support implementation of the Framework for Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education, with an additional £4.05m available to support nurture provision in schools. The Health Minister has agreed to provide an additional £1.5m on a recurrent basis from 2021/22 onwards.

Work is currently being progressed on the range of proposals contained within the Framework Implementation Plan – all of which have a focus on promotion, prevention and early intervention, through which Education, Health and Community services can continue to work together in an integrated way. Some of the new programmes have already commenced, including:

- Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCT) Text A Nurse service
- EA Youth Service REACH programme (Resilience Education Assisting Change to Happen) and
- The development of the CCEA Wellbeing Hub.

Each proposed programme will be subject to the normal approval processes, including economic appraisal, and regular monitoring of delivery through an outcomes based approach. A post project evaluation will be undertaken for each programme.

A broader evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the Framework and the impact on the wellbeing of children and young people will also be considered, subject to securing the additional resources required.

The Framework Implementation Plan can be accessed at Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework Implementation Plan - Feb 2021.PDF ([education-ni.gov.uk](http://education-ni.gov.uk))

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Education to confirm (i) when he expects to make a further announcement for capital new build projects; and (ii) whether he will include St Colm's High School.

**(AQW 18364/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** It is my intention to consider a further call for major capital works projects before the end of the 2021/22 financial year. Planning and preparation for that call will commence in the near future.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), as the managing authority for St Colm's High School, will initially consider whether the school is in need of major capital funding and if so, will submit an application on behalf of the school when a call for project applications is made by the Department.

Applications received will be assessed against criteria set out in a Protocol for selection, which is published in advance of each call being made.



## Department of Finance

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance to detail the COVID-19 schemes approved under Ministerial Direction during 2019/20 and 2020/21.

**(AQW 16399/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** A list of all COVID-19 Schemes for 2019-20 and 2020-21 approved to date under Ministerial Direction is attached at Annex A.

As I advised previously, my department is currently working on enhanced guidance to clarify the process to be followed in respect of Ministerial Directions which includes a new process for the Department of Finance publishing such information. It is hoped that this will issue by the end of March.

### Annex A

#### List of COVID-19 Schemes approved to date under Ministerial Direction for 2019-20 and 2020-21.

Department	Subject
The Executive Office	Support for Travel Agents
Department for Infrastructure	City of Derry Airport
Department of Finance	Covid Temporary time limited financial support for Belfast International Airport and Belfast City Airport
Department of Finance	Extension of the financial support Agreed for Derry City and Strabane District to all areas (Localised Restrictions Support Scheme)
Department for the Economy	Covid-19 £10k Business Support Grant Scheme
Department for the Economy	Covid-19 £25k Business Support Scheme for Retail, hospitality, Tourism and Leisure
Department for the Economy	Covid Microbusiness Hardship Scheme
Department for the Economy	Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme
Department for the Economy	Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme - Circuit Breaker Extension
Department for the Economy	Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme - Evidence Threshold
Department for the Economy	Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme
Department for the Economy	Newly Self-employed Scheme
Department for the Economy	Limited Company Director Scheme
Department for the Economy	Bed & Breakfast, Guest House and Guest Accommodation Providers Support Scheme
Department for the Economy	Large Tourism and Hospitality Scheme
Department for the Economy	Student Disruption Payment
Department for the Economy	Extension of Large Tourism and Hospitality Scheme to 31 March 21
Department for the Economy	Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme Extension to 31 March 2021
Department for the Economy	CoDA Public Service Obligation 2021-23
Department of Health	Reimburse strike pay to healthcare workers for the period November 2019 to January 2020
Department of Health	£500 Bonus Scheme for health and social care staff
Department of Health	Special Recognition Payment to healthcare students
Department of Health	Additional Financial Support to DoH core grant-funded organisations in 2020/21
Department of Health	Air Ambulance NI
Department of Education	Free School Meals in Special Schools – direct payments for all entitled pupils in addition to provision for those in school during period of partial closures and low attendance (25 Jan to 12 Feb 2021)

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Finance, following an international rose breeder's announcement of a new rose to mark Northern Ireland's Centenary, whether he will give consideration to creating a display of these flowers within the Stormont Estate. (AQW 16463/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** The policy on planting on the grounds of the Stormont Estate is to approve only those requests which commemorate international events such as World Aids Day or International Labour Day. In addition, given the sensitive historic and political issues involved, I would encourage you to work with the other parties represented in the Assembly to agree a proposal on this issue which is both in line with the Department policy and that is representative of our wider community. I will, of course, give any such proposal full and fair consideration.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the implementation of NI Law Commission 2013 Apartments Report Recommendations. (AQW 17755/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** During the previous mandate, my Department considered the Law Commission's report and undertook preliminary work in the context of developing legislation around shared property managers, including registration of such companies and codes of conduct.

There is insufficient time left in the course of this mandate to develop and finalise a Bill and take it through the various stages in the Assembly, further work is planned that will permit an incoming Executive to consider this issue next year.

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Finance what consideration he has given to introducing legislation to regulate estate rent charges and property management companies to them into line with other jurisdictions. (AQW 17801/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** My Department has undertaken preliminary work in the context of developing legislation around shared property managers, including registration of such companies and codes of conduct.

There is insufficient time left in the course of this mandate to develop and finalise a Bill and take it through the various stages in the Assembly, but further work is planned that will permit an incoming Executive to consider this issue next year.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Finance (i) for an update on his Department's review of businesses asked to repay Localised Restrictions Support Scheme grant money; (ii) how many applications are currently being held for review; and (iii) how many of the applications reviewed were deemed eligible for payment. (AQW 17844/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:**

- (i) Following the recent Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) eligibility reassessment, 480 emails were issued on 31 March 2021 to applicants who were asked to repay LRSS payments. 375 of these businesses are still in an overpayment situation.
- (ii) Excluding applications being held for administrative reasons (such as duplicate applications from the same business or incorrect bank details), 806 applications are currently being held for review. This number includes the 375 referred to in part (i).
- (iii) 44 applicants have since been deemed eligible for LRSS and are no longer required to repay LRSS support.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance to detail the level of additional funding, reported in his statement of 27 April 2021, being allocated towards funding (i) for the Bright Start School Age Grant Scheme; and (ii) supporting Derry City Airport. (AQW 18013/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** Treasury has advised DoF of a significant level of additional funding for 2021-22 which could not be included in the Budget 2021-22 outcome as it had not been confirmed by the Secretary of State. To ensure this funding is used effectively the Executive agreed a number of confirmed in-year allocations which were announced alongside the Budget 2021-22.

These confirmed in-year allocations include:

- (i) £1.4 million to DE for the Bright Start School Age Grant Scheme for 2021-22
- (ii) £0.9 million to DfE for the continuation of the Public Service Route between Derry and London.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Finance to detail the (i) number; and (ii) percentage of Civil Service staff who will be (a) offered; and (b) encouraged to work from home after the further easing of lockdown rules. (AQW 18025/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** Civil Service employees that are able to carry out their job roles from home or remotely, in line with departmental requirements, will have the opportunity to agree with their line management the best location for them to carry out their work. At this stage we don't know what the numbers or percentages will be.

It is understood that there are some operational job roles where working remotely will not be appropriate.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Finance what criteria was used for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme to determine if a sports club is a separate independent business to a social club which is run by the sports club.

**(AQW 18073/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Sports clubs are not considered to be businesses because they are not established and operated to generate a profit for the owners. Support for Sports Clubs is the responsibility of the Department for Communities.

The Localised Restriction Support Scheme (LRSS) provides support for private sector businesses, such as restaurants or shops, restricted by the Health Regulations. This includes those where an independent and separate restricted business operates from within sporting premises and is not associated with the sports club or governing body.

An applicant in these circumstances would be asked for evidence that they are a legally separate business and are managed independently of the sports club.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Finance, following the cyber-attack on the Health Service Executive in the Republic of Ireland, what assurances he can give regarding the robustness of data security in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

**(AQW 19173/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Department of Finance Digital Shared Services (DSS) provide a corporate IT infrastructure service to all NICS Departments. It has implemented multi-layered technical defences to help protect NICS Departments and its network from cyber attacks.

We have complemented these technical developments with significant staff awareness materials to provide robust data security for all organisations using the NICS network.

We continue to enhance our security operations with Department of Finance services and applications regularly audited against industry standards.

Many NICS Departments manage their own specific line of business IT applications and associated governance arrangements.

## Department of Health

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health to detail his Department's policy for paying staff if (i) they are isolating due to being in contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19; (ii) a member of their household is isolating because they have come into contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19; or (iii) they have to care for a child who has been sent home from school as the child has come into contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19.

**(AQW 7883/17-22)**

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):**

- (i) If a member of HSC staff has had close recent contact with someone in the community who has COVID-19, they will be contacted by a representative from the Public Health Agency. If as a consequence they are advised by Public Health to self-isolate for 10 days, they must do so. It is important they notify their line manager and Occupational Health as soon as possible. Where they can be facilitated to work from home they should do so.

Staff members who are asked to remain away from work due to health reasons should suffer no financial detriment. Staff should receive their full pay, that is, the pay they would have received had they been at work.

- (ii) In this case the staff member should continue to attend work and does not need to isolate, unless the household member is symptomatic and has a positive test.

If the household member tests positive then the HSC staff member and the rest of the immediate household members of the person who has tested positive must self-isolate until 10 days after the onset of symptoms or positive test. If any of these people develop symptoms, that person should seek a test. In the event of a positive result, their clock restarts to the date of onset of symptoms and they have to self-isolate for a further 10 days.

- (iii) Children may be sent home from school when another child has received a positive COVID-19 test result if they have been determined to be a close contact following a risk assessment by the school or the PHA. The child must then self-isolate for 10 days.

The rest of the household do not need to self-isolate unless they have also been in contact with the person who has tested positive for COVID-19. PHA guidance states that only symptomatic children should be tested.

If the staff members child is not symptomatic but is required to isolate for 10 days due to contact with the person who tested positive for COVID-19, then the rest of the household including parents/guardians do not need to isolate (unless they have also been in contact with the person who tested positive) and can continue to attend work.

Isolation of the whole household would only happen if the child or another member of the household becomes symptomatic or tests positive for COVID-19.

If childcare becomes an issue, members of staff should alert their manager as soon as possible and discuss what options are available to them to enable them to remain in work if possible, while also providing childcare for their children.

Line managers are encouraged to be as flexible as possible and offer various working options where available such as working from home, temporary working arrangements, such as compressed hours, evening or weekend work, or different hours or work patterns which will also help facilitate childcare support.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health whether a mobile testing COVID-19 centre will be placed in Omagh.  
(AQW 9384/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The location of testing facilities across Northern Ireland, including mobile testing units (MTUs), is kept under constant review.

A walk-through testing site has been located at Lisanelly Avenue, Omagh from 8th January 2021 to date.

Further information is available at:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of complaints or concerns raised about the current tracheostomy tube installation system.  
(AQW 14394/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Information provided by Health and Social Care Trusts indicates that there has been one complaint in relation to the tracheostomy tube installation system.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health where the additional asymptomatic testing centres in the Belfast area will be located.  
(AQW 16116/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Officials in my Department are currently working with Belfast City Council and other key stakeholders to identify appropriate sites to meet the requirement for workforce asymptomatic testing in the Belfast area.

Private sector businesses with more than 50 employees who cannot work from home are eligible to receive free lateral flow tests under the DHSC funded scheme. The cost of on-site asymptomatic testing facilities, such as those at Moy Park, must be covered by the employer.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health whether the cost of testing facilities at Moy Park will be incurred by the public purse or the employer.  
(AQW 16117/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Officials in my Department are currently working with Belfast City Council and other key stakeholders to identify appropriate sites to meet the requirement for workforce asymptomatic testing in the Belfast area.

Private sector businesses with more than 50 employees who cannot work from home are eligible to receive free lateral flow tests under the DHSC funded scheme. The cost of on-site asymptomatic testing facilities, such as those at Moy Park, must be covered by the employer.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health under what criteria would employers be asked to contribute to the costs of COVID-19 testing facilities on their premises.  
(AQW 16118/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Officials in my Department are currently working with Belfast City Council and other key stakeholders to identify appropriate sites to meet the requirement for workforce asymptomatic testing in the Belfast area.

Private sector businesses with more than 50 employees who cannot work from home are eligible to receive free lateral flow tests under the DHSC funded scheme. The cost of on-site asymptomatic testing facilities, such as those at Moy Park, must be covered by the employer.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health how many contact tracers were recruited for each month since April 2020, broken down by type of contract (i) full time staff; (ii) part time staff; and (iii) bank staff.  
(AQW 16235/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The Public Health Agency (PHA) has provided details on the number of contact tracers recruited for each month since April 2020 as shown in the table below.

Number of Contact Tracers Recruited	Full Time Contract	Part Time Contract	Bank Contract	Total
Apr-20	Pilot service undertaken within pre-existing Public Health Agency (PHA) staffing structures			
May-20				
Jun-20	0	0	6	6
Jul-20	3	0	4	7
Aug-20	1	6	6	13
Sep-20	5	22	32	59
Oct-20	15	29	88	132
Nov-20	11	18	36	65
Dec-20	5	9	26	40
Jan-21	7	21	9	37
Feb-21	0	0	0	0
Mar-21	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>359</b>

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to outline the procedures that have been put in place to ensure high risk populations are targeted for contact tracing purposes for COVID-19 including (i) members of the BAME community; (ii) those living in areas of high deprivation; and (iii) those working in high risk occupations with close contact to other members of staff or the public.

**(AQW 16236/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Public Health Agency (PHA) has ongoing engagement where necessary with Vulnerable Groups and with the BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) population for COVID-19 contact tracing purposes.

The Contact Tracing Vulnerable Groups Action Plan has been developed by PHA to enable and facilitate this engagement. The plan recognises the increased risks for specific vulnerable groups within the Northern Ireland population and therefore a need for pro-active steps to optimise testing, tracing and compliance with PHA COVID-19 Guidelines.

Working with a range of bodies including for example the Inter-Ethnic Forum and the South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP), and through the Health and Safety Executive and workplace networks, PHA targets messaging to specific communities or workplaces where required. This includes for example to publicise and raise awareness when Mobile Testing Units are deployed in response to local need.

The Contact Tracing Service (CTS) has access to interpreter services to facilitate communication with those for whom English is not their first language. Information on COVID-19 is available in a number of alternative languages and formats on the PHA website and through social media channels.

Where a case or contact advises that they work in health or social care, the PHA undertakes a more detailed risk assessment of their circumstances to inform necessary actions.

When PHA identifies a cluster or outbreak or an increase of COVID-19 cases in a geographic location, its Health Improvement Team works as necessary with local networks and services, including HSC Trusts, District Councils and the Department for Communities, to ensure support for high risk or vulnerable communities. In the course of engagement with cases and contacts, PHA can also connect people with sources of practical support through links with Advice NI as required.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health how Multi-Disciplinary Teams involved in the assessment of autism are currently completing these assessments.

**(AQW 16385/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Whilst COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the delivery of autism assessments for children, I am aware that multi-disciplinary teams within our Trusts have been working diligently, both nationally and internationally, to identify alternative methods of delivering assessments for children which is compliant to NICE Guidelines, whilst still adhering to public health guidelines and social distancing restrictions. Clinicians have continued collating case histories and providing support and interventions for those families awaiting assessment through telephone consultation sessions or the use of technology, based on a case by case basis and the individual needs of children and families involved. Clinicians were, for a period of time, unable to conduct the observational element of assessment, Autism Diagnostic Observational Schedule (ADOS), as a result of the restrictions and the impact of PPE on the individual being assessed. This would render the

assessment invalid. However, alternative methods of deploying this aspect of assessment have now been implemented by multi-disciplinary teams through the use of technology and also by securing additional accommodation to enable socially distanced observational assessments to be undertaken and ensure all public health guidelines are adhered to.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health when tonsillectomy procedures will recommence.  
(AQW 16747/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** As we emerge from the latest wave of the pandemic, the focus of our health service will continue to be on resetting all elective services in an environment that is safe for both staff and patients. Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts are working with clinicians and the HSC Board to prioritise the care needs of patients who have been referred into the HSC and also to ensure that all available capacity is utilised in a consistent and transparent manner.

The HSC Board is continuing to work with independent sector healthcare providers in order to increase the capacity available to the HSC to provide elective care, including tonsillectomy procedures, in the coming months.

The latest Trust rebuild plans are available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/rebuilding-health-and-social-care-services-phase-5-plans>

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the planned full resumption of adult and child respite services.  
(AQW 16856/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Respite and short breaks services are open at a reduced capacity, in line with Infection Prevention Control (IPC) requirements and social distancing guidelines. IPC and social distancing guidelines are subject to regular review cognisant of the rollout and effectiveness of the vaccine programme and rates of infection.

Services are continuously monitored and assessed so that service uptake and unfilled spaces are reallocated where possible to do so. Aligned to this process, Trusts have been working with families and community colleagues to scope additional/ alternative supports, including Direct Payments and domiciliary care.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the NI Human Rights Commission Annual statement on health-related rights.  
(AQW 17042/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I welcome the Annual Statement from the Human Rights Commission and will work, as far as practicable in current circumstances, to progress the relevant issues raised.

You may be interested to note progress on the following:

Children missing from care - There is currently a joint HSC/PSNI Strategic Action Plan on Missing Children. This includes work to revise the Missing Children Protocol which was last updated in 2015. The aim of the revised protocol is to contextualise missing children in the context of a therapeutic understanding of their needs and presenting risks so that interventions and responses are appropriate and attuned to their needs. This work will consider revising the grading of risks to focus more specifically on each child's individual circumstances, patterns of going missing, intelligence relating to their missing episodes, and known risks. In addition a review of the overarching Strategic Action Plan will also be undertaken jointly with PSNI.

Implementation of legislative reform on termination of Pregnancy –You will be aware that this issue is subject to Judicial Review and I am unable to comment at this stage.

A free-standing offence for a care worker, who ill-treats or wilfully neglects - The Department carried out a recent consultation on legislative options to inform an Adult Protection Bill for Northern Ireland which sought views on whether new offences should be considered to address ill-treatment and wilful neglect. The proposed offences include introducing new 'care worker' and 'care provider' offences, similar to those already introduced in other parts of the UK. The consultation ran for 16 weeks up to Thursday 8 April. The next steps will be to analyse the results of the consultation before developing the final policy in advance of preparing the draft Bill.

An action plan for female genital mutilation in NI - A number of measures are in place and underway:

- Work to update the 2014 Multi-agency practice guidelines on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) for frontline safeguarding professionals in Northern Ireland is currently ongoing in the context of other Departmental priorities.
- A cross-Departmental Child Protection Senior Officials Group oversees a work plan to protect girls at risk of FGM.
- Regional training, practice guidance and care pathways are in place to assist those health care professionals who may encounter FGM. Safeguarding measures include awareness raising of the risks of the practice among communities.
- NI Maternity systems record at maternity appointments if a woman/girl has been previously subjected to FGM.
- The Department is amending the Children Order to add proceedings for FGMPOs to the list of family proceedings. This will allow an applicant for an FGMPO to also apply for a care or supervision order as part of the same proceedings, rather than having to make separate applications for such orders. It will also enable a court, when dealing with an application for an FGMPO, to make other orders regarding the welfare of the child. This will increase the ability of the court to act quickly to protect children at risk.

An Adoption and Children Act in NI - Drafting of the Adoption and Children Bill has now been completed and work is ongoing to secure the final, necessary approvals to enable the Bill to be introduced in the Northern Ireland Assembly as soon as possible in the current mandate.

Processing of confidential information under the Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Act 2016 - The Department places great importance on the completion of work on regulations governing the Secondary Use of Patient Identifiable Information arising from the Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Act 2016. However, for the past 12 months departmental resources have been reallocated to support the Department's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The complex work to develop regulations for consideration by the Health Committee and the full Assembly has restarted. Health officials intend to include discussion on Secondary use of Patient Identifiable Information within the planned public engagement on a "Data Strategy for the use of Health and Social Care information". The initial phase of this work will be a consultation with key stakeholders. Draft regulations will be brought to the Assembly for formal consideration once consultations have concluded.

Analysis of the efficient and effective delivery of health and social care services is already undertaken on a daily basis using anonymised, non-attributable data, in line with best practice in the production of statistics and use of sensitive, confidential personal healthcare data.

Amendment or policy direction to ensure a full set of General Practitioner services is genuinely available to any person, including undocumented or irregular migrants - Eligibility to access publicly funded healthcare in Northern Ireland is based on ordinary residence. A person will be ordinarily resident when that residence is lawful, voluntary and for a settled purpose as part of the regular order of life for the time being. Anyone who is ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland is eligible to access publicly funded healthcare.

A person who is not ordinarily resident is a visitor. Access to healthcare in Northern Ireland is provided to visitors with exemptions being regulated for under the Health and Personal Social Services Provision of Health Services to Persons Not Ordinarily Resident Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 ("the Regulations") provide that some services are always exempt from charge whilst some categories of visitor are exempt from charge. The services which are always exempt from charge include

- accident and emergency services up until the point of admission into hospital and emergency treatment from a GP;
- family planning services;
- diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections;
- diagnosis and treatment of certain infectious diseases including COVID-19, and
- treatment for persons detained under the Mental Health Act.

The categories of visitor which are exempt from charge include refugees and asylum seekers, including failed asylum seekers, victims, and suspected victims of human trafficking and those individuals who are determined to be exempt from charge on exceptional humanitarian grounds.

Under the Health and Personal Social Services (General Medical Services Contracts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004, GP practices provide services to patients who are registered with them, to temporary residents or to patients where emergency or immediate necessary treatment is required.

Regarding access to GP and other primary health care services, Northern Ireland, as with the rest of the UK, has a system whereby anyone can get an emergency appointment or immediately necessary treatment with a GP in the locality where they are staying. This also applies to those with no fixed address.

Dedicated Emergency Department minimum care standards - In addition to existing Ministerial standards and indicators of care, there has been significant work into protecting standards of care in Emergency Departments in recent years, including the development of a "Compassion and Care in the ED" toolkit, new complaints procedures in each Trust, and the development of escalation plans for each Trust which take a stepped approach during times of increased demands.

It is also worth noting that we are currently in a period of significant reform of urgent and emergency care in NI. The forthcoming Review of Urgent and Emergency Care will set out a proposed integrated urgent and emergency care system which will deliver a safer, more effective service to patients.

A Review of Mental Capacity (NI) Act 2016 regarding mental health treatment of children below the age of 16 - When fully commenced the Mental Capacity Act (NI) 2016 will provide a statutory framework for decision making when a person over the age of 16 lacks capacity. This will be fusion legislation encompassing both mental capacity and mental health legislation. As such the Mental Health (NI) Order 1986 will be repealed for those over 16. For those under 16 the Order will continue to operate. Schedule 8 of the Mental Capacity Act amends the Order to provide additional safeguards in relation to best interests and ensuring the voice of the young person is considered in the decision making. It is expected that the amendments to the Order will be commenced at the same time as the Act is fully commenced (and replaces the Order for over 16s). There is currently no date set for full commencement of the Act.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health to detail the waiting lists for addiction services in Belfast, broken down by district. (AQW 17062/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The Department does not hold this information centrally and it was requested from Belfast Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust. Belfast HSC Trust have provided information pertaining to waiting lists for the Trust's Community Addiction Team.

Please find information detailed below.

Table 1. Number of persons waiting for an assessment by community addiction team, by waiting time-bands, and constituency area in Belfast HSC Trust, as at 31 March 2021.

<b>Community Addiction Team: Persons waiting as at 31st March 2021</b>	<b>0-9 weeks</b>	<b>9+ weeks</b>
North	56	0
South	18	0
East	41	0
West	26	0
Central	<5*	0
South Antrim	0	0

**Source:** Belfast HSC Trust

\*Actual figure suppressed for confidentiality.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health what progress has been made on the plans to reopen and to provide day centre and respite care for people with disabilities and older people.

**(AQW 17186/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Day centre and respite care services are open at a reduced capacity, in line with Infection Prevention Control (IPC) requirements and social distancing guidelines. IPC and social distancing guidelines are subject to regular review cognisant of the rollout and effectiveness of the vaccine programme and rates of infection.

Services are continuously monitored and assessed so that service uptake and unfilled spaces are reallocated where possible to do so. Aligned to this process, Trusts have been working with families and community colleagues to scope additional/ alternative supports, including Direct Payments, and domiciliary and respite options.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health to outline the timescale for Dementia Service Improvement Leads returning to their roles.

**(AQW 17214/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Dementia Service Leads in four of the Health and Social Care Trusts have already returned to their roles. Belfast Trust's will return to their role on 3 May 2021.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of respite (i) learning disability care beds; (ii) residential care beds; (iii) nursing care beds; and (iv) mental health care beds, in each constituency.

**(AQW 17228/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Department does not hold this information centrally and it was requested from the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts.

The number of respite beds / short break beds, by HSC Trust, for the client groups 'Learning Disability' and 'Mental Health' is set out in Table 1. The number of respite beds / short break beds, by HSC Trust, situated within 'Residential Care' and 'Nursing Care' is set out in Table 2.

**Table 1: Number of respite beds / short break beds, by HSC Trust, for client groups 'Learning Disability' and 'Mental Health', as at 31st March 2021.**

<b>HSC Trust</b>	<b>Learning Disability</b>	<b>Mental Health</b>
Belfast	26	0
Northern	4	0
South Eastern	18	0
Southern	28	0
Western	34	0

**Source:** Health & Social Care Trusts



Table 2: Number of respite beds / short break beds, by HSC Trust, situated within 'Residential Care' and 'Nursing Care', as at 31st March 2021.

HSC Trust	Residential Care*	Nursing Care*
Belfast	25	1
Northern	4	0
South Eastern	16	10
Southern	11	19
Western	24	16

**Source:** Health & Social Care Trusts

\* Includes respite beds / short break beds for all client groups (including learning disability and mental health that may have already been counted in Table 1).

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Health whether the Western Health and Social Care Trust ceased the administration of the MS drug Ocrevus during the pandemic; and what plans he has to ease the backlog in the Western Trust area given that a quick referral for Ocrevus is necessary in most MS cases.

**(AQW 17266/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Ocrelizumab (Ocrevus) for treating multiple sclerosis (MS) is administered as an infusion during an outpatient appointment once every 6 months. In line with the regional approach to the first surge of the pandemic, the Western Health and Social Care Trust temporarily suspended ocrelizumab (Ocrevus) infusions in March 2020. They were recommenced in summer 2020. The current backlog is being addressed with the addition of Waiting List Initiative clinics.

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant AQW 16763/17-22 and given the 18 month waiting time for some referrals, whether he will develop a stand alone strategy to develop occupational therapy services for the elderly.

**(AQW 17359/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** There are currently no plans to develop a standalone strategy to develop occupational therapy services for the elderly. However, the Department has carried out a series of AHP workforce reviews including into Occupational Therapy to ensure the availability of an AHP workforce capable of meeting current and future service needs. We hope to have this paper published in the near future. This is a living document which will be continuously reviewed to take account of additional requirements as service needs arise including the impacts of Covid-19.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health for an update on developing a Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 17469/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Delivery of the Cancer Strategy was delayed for a short period due to the redeployment of staff in response to the global pandemic. However, work has resumed fully on this programme of work and I expect that it will be available for external consultation through the summer of 2021.

Under the Cancer Strategy remit, my Department with support from the Health and Social Care Board, has prepared a draft COVID-19 recovery plan 'Building Back; Rebuilding Better'. The plan is fully aligned with the cancer strategy and targets and addresses cancer services impacted by the pandemic and will focus on a 3 year period until March 2024. 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.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health whether he has made any bids for additional resources to help clear surgery waiting lists.

**(AQW 17475/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** In acknowledging the additional pressures placed on waiting lists which has been exacerbated by Covid-19 my Department made a bid of £30.3m to the Department of Finance as part of the 2021/22 Budget Exercise in respect of Elective Services.

While this bid for additional funding was not met specifically my Department did receive Covid Rebuild funding of which I intend to use some £40m to fund Waiting List Initiatives and other Elective developments including orthopaedics.

**Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Health whether vets and veterinary surgeons are on the priority vaccination list; and to outline for the rationale for this position.

**(AQW 17549/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

JCVI advice on prioritisation of the vaccine was published on 2nd December 2020. The ranking of priorities is a combination of clinical risk stratification and an age-based approach, which should optimise both targeting and deliverability: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/priority-groups-for-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccination-advice-from-the-jcvi-2-december-2020>

JCVI has advised that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age.

Beyond health and social care workers and care home workers, JCVI have not recommended prioritisation for vaccination based on occupation. As such, Vets and their staff will be vaccinated in line with the age or clinical cohort of the population they belong to.

I am aware that other groups have asked to be considered a priority group due to the nature of their work. Whilst I understand the desire to be vaccinated as soon as possible it is essential that we concentrate on those at the greatest risk from the effects of COVID-19.

Please be assured that the COVID-19 vaccination programme in NI is continuing at pace and we are currently inviting those who are 35 years old and over to book their vaccinations. With view to offer to further age cohorts in the near future.

**Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health how many children, in each Health and Social Care Trust, who have been assessed by a paediatric ophthalmology and referred for surgery, have had their surgery in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 17610/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The information requested is not held within the Department. The question was put forward to the Health and Social Care Trusts for their responses. Paediatric Ophthalmology Surgery is only carried out in the Belfast and Western Health and Social Care Trusts. Please see below tabulated information provided by Belfast and Western Health and Social Care Trusts.

**Total Number of Paediatric (under 18) Elective Ophthalmology Procedures.**

	Belfast HSCT	Western HSCT
2018/19	316	84
2019/20	245	65
2020/21	67	27
<b>Total</b>	<b>628</b>	<b>176</b>

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health how many patients accessing Health and Social Care services are prescribed cannabis medicines; and how many residents of Northern Ireland are known to be on prescriptions for cannabis medicines via the Independent Sector. (AQW 17639/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** There were 188 patients accessing Health and Social Care services who were prescribed cannabis medicines between 1st January and 31st December 2020.

It is not known how many residents of Northern Ireland are on prescriptions for cannabis medicines via the Independent Sector.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland on the supply of podiatry products from GB to the public and private sectors; and what consequential representations have been made by his Department. (AQW 17643/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The UK Government and my Department have been supporting industry to adapt to changes for supplying medicines and medical devices to the Northern Ireland market from 1 January 2021.

Department officials have been dealing with a range of issues involving delays to medicine and medical device supplies. The majority related to trader readiness and most have been satisfactorily resolved at this stage.

My officials recently met with members of the College of Podiatry and a major GB supplier in relation to the continuing supply of Podiatry products to the Northern Ireland sector. A number of issues were raised relating to the supply of podiatry products including trader and courier readiness. Further engagement with my Department has been agreed, with a particular focus on Trader Readiness and courier transportation.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the online petition from Marie Curie which has been signed by more than 10,200 people across Northern Ireland and calls for end of life care and bereavement support to be prioritised in the draft Programme for Government. (AQW 17682/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** An All Party Assembly Motion on 27 April 2021 called on the Northern Ireland 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.

During the debate, I assured Members of my support for dying, death and bereavement to be included in the Programme for Government and for palliative and end of life care and support in bereavement to be an intrinsic part of the Executive's collective vision to support all our citizens, from the start to the end of their lives.

It is important to recognise also that dying, death and bereavement are not just matters for Health and Social Care but require a public health approach that draws on the expertise and experience of the wider community working in partnership with Government Departments and other organisations and agencies.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health how many private child autism diagnoses have been accepted by each Health and Social Care Trust over the last three years.

**(AQW 17740/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The number of private child autism diagnoses is not held by my Department, nor is this readily available from current Health and Social Care Trust information systems. To access this information a manual trawl would be required of hundreds of files at a disproportionate cost.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department is taking to ensure quality respiratory care provision for people living in rural communities.

**(AQW 17750/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) commissions respiratory care in both acute and community settings across the whole of Northern Ireland as part of the overall Service and Budget Agreements (SBAs) with each of the Health and Social Care Trusts.

The SBAs do not include commissioning of respiratory services particularly for people living in rural communities, but do include the provision of services by community respiratory teams who help support people with respiratory illness in the community or primary care settings closer to the patient's home rather than a need to attend for outpatient/treatment in a hospital setting.

In 2016 the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority carried out a review of Community Respiratory Services. The review recognised the very committed community respiratory services workforce, who provide a patient-centred service for those with long-term respiratory conditions but highlighted the need for equal service provision for every patient across Northern Ireland and for stronger integration across primary, community and acute services.

A Community Respiratory Services Review by the Regional Respiratory Forum NI in 2019 included a scoping exercise of community services. Whilst there was a degree in variation across HSC Trusts, all Trusts provided services for patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) with 4 out of 5 Trusts providing Bronchiectasis, Interstitial Lung Disease (ILD), Pulmonary Rehabilitation, and Oxygen Services. Some Trusts work closely with their palliative care teams and district nurses in caring for end stage respiratory patients.

The review set out a number of recommendations prioritising the following 5 developments:

- 1 Increase capacity and resources for pulmonary rehabilitation in community settings especially in HSC Trusts with waiting lists
- 2 Increase capacity of community services for patients with bronchiectasis to improve quality of care, patient experience and outcomes in HSC Trust that are currently unable to meet recommended standards of care.
- 3 Resource and implement the ILD network service model proposed in 2016 to support full implementation of NICE technology assessments of antifibrotic medication.
- 4 Review staffing requirements in all HSC Trusts for home oxygen services to take account of growing population need.
- 5 Resource all HSC Trusts for consultant and specialist nurse long term ventilation leadership to improve care of this rapidly growing patient cohort.

Whilst the Covid-19 Pandemic has impacted on the ability to progress the recommendations, the HSCB is preparing a more strategic approach to planning of respiratory care in Northern Ireland. It will be necessary to develop new services over time and this would include ensuring that the needs of rural populations are assessed and met.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the benefits of increasing the number of Pre-Registration Occupational Therapy places from 50, as recommended in the workforce review, to 70 places annually to maximise the capability and flexibility of the workforce as outlined in the Strategic Framework for Rebuilding HSC Services.

**(AQW 17767/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Any increase to pre-registration numbers to any Health and Social Care profession is to be welcomed.

Any additional increases to Occupational Therapy undergraduate numbers will serve to help deliver on the rebuild and redesign of Health and Social Care services.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health how many recall letters have been issued to the former patients of Dr.Watt.  
(AQW 17768/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** A total of 276 Cohort 3 neurology patient recall letters have been issued to patients; 209 by the Belfast HSC Trust, 57 by the Ulster Independent Clinic and 10 by the Hillsborough Private Clinic.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health to list the hospitals, other than Mid Ulster, Dungannon and Downpatrick, that are offering emergency cataract procedures.  
(AQW 17773/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Cataract procedures are elective in nature and, whilst some may be prioritised as urgent, they are not deemed to be emergency interventions.

Prototype Cataract Day Procedure Centres (DPCs) were established at Downe, Mid Ulster, and South Tyrone Hospitals to deal with non-complex cataract cases.

Complex cataract procedures continue to be delivered, where possible, at Altnagelvin Hospital and Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex (Western HSC Trust) and at Royal Victoria and Mater Hospitals (Belfast HSC Trust).

While Covid-19 has inevitably impacted on service delivery, urgent treatments have been undertaken in both the HSC and as part of waiting list initiatives within the Independent Sector.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of (i) nurses; and (ii) midwives that have retired or left the Health Service, in each of the last five years.  
(AQW 17789/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Information on the number of registered nurses and midwives leaving Health and Social Care (HSC) organisations in each of the last five years is provided in the table below. The information presented has been calculated by comparing snapshots of directly employed HSC staff in post at 31 March each year, for example those who appeared on the March 2019 dataset but not March 2020 were classed as leavers in 2019/20. Figures will include staff who have left HSC organisations due to retirement or for other reasons in a particular year, however not all leavers may be permanent as some may re-join HSC again at a later date. In addition these leavers from HSC organisations could be taking up employment in another part of the wider health & social care system e.g. general practice or nursing home care. Figures presented may exclude some short-term staff who were not captured on one or both datasets.

#### Registered Nursing & Midwifery Staff Leaving HSC organisations in each year

Year	Registered Nurses	Registered Midwives
2015/16	783	77
2016/17	929	96
2017/18	1,111	72
2018/19	1,049	90
2019/20	1,043	57

**Source:** Human Resources, Payroll, Travel & Subsistence (HRPTS) system

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health whether there is a shortage of shower seats for people who are discharged from hospital; and what is the average waiting time for supply of a shower seat in each Health and Social Care Trust.  
(AQW 17799/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** There is currently no shortage of shower seats for people after they are discharged from Hospital. Regionally, a number of Trusts reported some temporary and short-term issues with supply, some of which were related to COVID and/or EU Exit, however these have since been resolved.

The average waiting time in each of the Health and Social Care trusts is dependent on the type of shower seat required and varies from Trust to Trust.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to increase the provision of mental health services in the Limavady area.  
(AQW 17805/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Mental health services in the Limavady area will continue to benefit proportionally from any future investment in these services in the Western Trust.

**Ms Rogan** asked the Minister of Health to outline the timeline for the installation of an MRI scanner at Downe Hospital, from when the need for the scanner was first accepted by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust to the projected installation date.

**(AQW 17808/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust submitted a proposal for a new MRI scanner in the Downe Hospital as part of a capital planning review exercise in 2018. A bid for the funding of a regional programme for diagnostic and imaging equipment was resubmitted to the Department of Finance in September 2020 as part of a four year capital budget information gathering exercise, however only a one year settlement has been confirmed for the 2021/22 financial year. My Department is unable to commence any significant new investments that will continue beyond this financial year.

The Trust is currently developing a business case for the MRI scanner and will be invited to submit this to my Department once funding is confirmed.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the (i) status; and (ii) outcome of the consultations that have been undertaken by the Department of Health since 2016, excluding NICE clinical guideline consultations.

**(AQW 17809/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Since 2016 there have been 56 consultations (excluding NICE) listed on the Department's website: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations>

Some consultations are UK wide, led by GB departments. All, bar one, are closed; the Public Consultation on the introduction of a statutory Duty of Candour in Northern Ireland published on 12 April is due to close 2 August 2021. The outcomes of the consultations are diverse and are not replicable in this format.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Health whether patients in receipt of nursing care outside a hospital setting, who requested an unacknowledged and unfulfilled assessment under Continuing Healthcare prior to February 2021, will have that request honoured and assessed according to the ECCU guidance 2010.

**(AQW 17812/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Patients in receipt of nursing care outside of a hospital setting, who requested an assessment be carried out prior to 11 February 2021, should have had the request considered in line with the guidance contained in ECCU 1/2010 Care Management, Provision of Services and Charging Guidance, by the relevant Trust. However, as this is an operational matter, any specific issues regarding an individual case should be raised with the local HSC Trust.

The Department is currently reviewing the relevant HSC circular, to ensure that it reflects the new policy position in respect of how new applications and existing applications already in the system, should be handled.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health (i) how many vaccine registrations have been taken to date; (ii) how many of these have been administered; and (iii) how many have been refused.

**(AQW 17831/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The uptake for the COVID-19 vaccination is generally high, with a high number of those invited for vaccine accepting the offer. With 935, 589 first dose vaccinations having been administered and 377,302 people having had two doses.

The vaccination programme is ongoing and individuals from all eligible cohorts continue to come forward. We are currently inviting those over 35 to book their vaccinations. We hope that open this to the next age cohort in the near future.

The department does not record who have not booked for vaccinations but rather those who have attended this can be found on the NI Covid – 19 Vaccinations Dashboard located at:

NI Covid-19 Vaccinations Dashboard | COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Northern Ireland ([hscni.net](https://hscni.net))

Figures below show the percentages of people vaccinated within each cohort as of close of play on the 27th April 2021:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| ■ CEV: 53% first dose, 13% second dose.              | ■ 70-74 years old: 91% first dose 28%, second dose. |
| ■ Moderate Risk: 87% first dose, 4% second dose.     | ■ 65-69 years old: 81% first dose, 64% second dose. |
| ■ Practice staff: 86% first dose, 28% second dose.   | ■ 60-64 years old: 42 % first dose.                 |
| ■ Carers: 84 % first dose, 2% second dose.           | ■ 55-59 years old: 37% first dose.                  |
| ■ Trust others: 100% first dose 82%, second dose,    | ■ 50-54 years old: 38% first dose.                  |
| ■ >80 years old: 98% first dose 36%, second dose,    | ■ 40-49 years old: 31% first dose.                  |
| ■ 75-79 years old: 100% first dose 34%, second dose. | ■ 30-39 years old: 7% first dose.                   |

The member will be aware that an individual may have eligibility outside their age cohort by virtue of occupation, carer or clinical status.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health to confirm whether parent and toddler groups can meet in outdoor settings once again.  
**(AQW 17834/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Under the current COVID-19 Regulations parent and toddler groups are covered by the "Restrictions on Gatherings". Currently, up to ten people (including children of all ages) from a maximum of two households can meet outdoors, and up to six people from a maximum of two households can meet in non-domestic indoor settings.

In a parent and toddler group setting the group organiser would constitute one of the two permitted households. This means that they cannot operate with more than one other household at present until such times as restrictions on normal gatherings are relaxed.

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Health why those who are clinically vulnerable and are shielding cannot yet receive a COVID-19 vaccine if their 16th birthday is after 31 March 2021; and whether he plans to allow this group to now receive a vaccine.

**(AQW 17849/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Please note that following a reviews, a new cut-off point of the 30 June 2021 is in place for CEV and CV individuals turning 16 years of age.

Therefore those who are 16 years old at 30th June 2021 will be eligible for vaccination.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health, given the findings cited in the hyponatremia public inquiry by Justice O'Hara, how many clinicians are now under GMC investigation.

**(AQW 17881/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The GMC have considered all doctors mentioned in the Inquiry report, including those who self-referred. Currently there are four doctors who remain subject to open cases.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Health (i) why a cancer patient under the care of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has received no contact or support from the Trust; (ii) how this delay will impact on the patient's survival rate; and (iii) how this situation matches the statement of the Trust saying all patients are being monitored.

**(AQW 17884/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** It would be highly inappropriate to discuss sensitive details of an individual's care in an Assembly Question.

Questions about an individual's care should be dealt with through confidential correspondence directed through my private office or directly to the HSC Trust.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Health what additional provision his Department is planning for services directed at supporting under 18's with drug or alcohol addiction in the (i) Limavady; and (ii) Coleraine areas.

**(AQW 17885/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Public Health Agency and the Health & Social Care Board currently commission and fund a full range of services that provide information, education and advice, intervention initiatives, and more specialist interventions and treatment specifically to children and young people presenting with alcohol and drug problems which are available in each Health & Social Care Trust area across Northern Ireland, including the Western and Northern Trusts which cover the Limavady and Coleraine areas respectively. More information on these services can be found at: <http://services.drugsandalcoholni.info/>

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health how often the Transformation Advisory Board has been involved in departmental decisions on transformation, including the number of meetings since June 2020.

**(AQW 17893/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The role of the TAB is to support and advise me on the approach to Transformation in the context of broader strategic factors and considerations.

There have been four TAB meetings since June 2020.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Health to detail the relevant charging policy under the new Continuing Health Care eligibility criteria for those individuals receiving a nursing service, in a facility outside a hospital setting.

**(AQW 17896/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The new Continuing Healthcare Policy has introduced the single eligibility criteria question, 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 charging policies have not changed.

In relation to receiving a nursing service the current charging policy in Northern Ireland is based on the principle that help should be given to those who cannot afford to help themselves. If an individual requires care in a nursing home, then the HSC Trust will make a weekly payment of £100 directly to the nursing home to cover the cost of providing the nursing care.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health when respite services and day centres will resume in full for service users and carers. (AQW 17939/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Day centres and respite care services are open at a reduced capacity, in line with Infection Prevention Control (IPC) requirements and social distancing guidelines. IPC and social distancing guidelines are subject to regular review cognisant of the rollout and effectiveness of the vaccine programme and rates of infection. As a result, increases in service provision are unlikely until such times as the guidance or requirements have been relaxed.

Services are continuously monitored and assessed so that service uptake and unfilled spaces are reallocated where possible to do so. Aligned to this process, Trusts have been working with families and community colleagues to scope additional/ alternative supports, including Direct Payments, and domiciliary and respite options.

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Health, in circumstances where a constituent presents in desperation for, and in urgent need of, addiction treatment, (i) whether a 10 day response period from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is adequate; and (ii) what will he do to streamline response times and action taken to ensure addicts and their elected representatives are provided with the necessary information, support and pathways to prevent potential relapse. (AQW 17948/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Belfast Health & Social Care Trust (BHSCT) has advised me that addiction services are currently provided in line with NICE guidelines. For patients seeking addiction treatment in a 'crisis' situation who require urgent physical or mental health care, assessment will be undertaken and appropriate onward referral made.

BHSCT provides timely access to addiction services. There are a range of both statutory and Community and Voluntary sector services available to meet the requirements of patients at different steps along their recovery journey. These can be accessed through discussion with a GP and/or by referral to the BHSCT Community Addiction Service. In addition, a directory of substance use related services is available online at: <https://drugsandalcoholni.info/>.

The Department is currently leading on the co-development of our new substance use strategy, working in partnership with key stakeholders, including service users and their families. The public consultation on this new strategy closed in late February, and officials are currently analysing the many responses received with a view to finalising & publishing, subject to the necessary approvals.

The vision of the new strategy is: "People in Northern Ireland are supported in the prevention and reduction of harm and stigma related to the use of alcohol and other drugs, have access to high quality treatment and support services, and will be empowered to maintain recovery."

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 5806/17-22, what engagement his Department has had with arm's-lengths bodies, including Health and Social Care Trusts, on live streaming their Board meetings. (AQW 17962/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** On foot of a query from a member of the public, my officials engaged with Belfast Health and Social Care Trust who advised of their intention to live stream meetings from 1 April 2021. All Health ALBs are required to make arrangements to provide the public with access to Board meetings; the format and provision of public access to board meetings is a matter for the individual ALB Boards, in line with covid regulations.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to outline the current review programme for the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority. (AQW 17963/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The current RQIA Review Programme is set out below:

Review of GP out of Hours Services

- Review report was published in April 2021

Review of Serious Adverse Incidents in Northern Ireland

- Review report to due be published June 2021.

Review of Services for Vulnerable Persons Detained in Northern Ireland Prisons

- Review report to due be published July 2021.

#### **RQIA Neurology Work Programme**

Review of the governance of outpatient services in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust with a particular focus on neurology services and other high volume specialities.

- Review report published in February 2020

Review of governance arrangements in Independent (Private) Hospitals and Hospices in Northern Ireland.

- Review report is due to be published May 2021

Expert Review of Records of Patients of Dr Watt who died 2008-18

- Review ongoing

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the £500 special recognition payment for Health Service staff.  
(AQW 17986/17-22)

**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.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health for an update on Minimum Unit Pricing consultation, including possible options for consideration.

(AQW 17990/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Minimum Unit Pricing: All-Ireland Basis

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health what discussions he has had with counterparts in Dublin on the introduction of Minimum Unit Pricing for Alcohol legislation on an all-Ireland basis, including a list of dates on which formal ministerial meetings occurred.

(AQW 17991/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I met with Frank Feighan TD, Minister for State for Public Health, Wellbeing and the National Drugs Strategy in Ireland on 16 February 2021 to discuss Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) for Alcohol. We also discussed the issue during the British-Irish Council Ministerial Meeting of the Misuse of Substances Work Sector chaired by Minister Feighan on 11 March 2021.

At these meetings, we both acknowledged the evidence from the Scottish model demonstrated that introducing MUP could be an effective measure for reducing the harms that can be caused by alcohol consumption.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the timeframe of the completion of the substance use strategy and the publication of a Minimum Unit Pricing consultation.

(AQW 17992/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** As part of the co-production approach to the strategy development, the consultation responses are being analysed and discussed with the co-production writing group. The final strategy will then be subject to the necessary approvals process both within the Department and at the Executive. Subject to these necessary approvals, it is expected that a final Substance Use Strategy will be launched in the coming weeks.

I believe that the introduction of legislation for Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) for alcohol has the potential to be a key population-level health measure to address the harms related to alcohol consumption. I have therefore made a commitment to have a full consultation on MUP within a year of our new substance use strategy being published.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health how many legal cases Brett Lockhart QC is involved in with his Department or Health and Social Care Trusts, other than the neurology recall.

(AQW 18009/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Mr Brett Lockhart QC is the Chairperson of the Independent Neurology Inquiry (INI). The INI operates independently of all organisations, including the Department of Health. The INI does not have responsibility for the recall of neurology patients; that is the responsibility of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. The Terms of Reference for the INI are available at: [www.neurologyinquiry.org.uk](http://www.neurologyinquiry.org.uk).

Mr Lockhart is not involved in any legal cases with the Department of Health or any of the Health and Social Care Trusts.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health whether further consideration has been given to ring fencing funds garnered through the Soft Drinks Industry Levy to address conditions such as obesity and type 2 diabetes.

(AQW 18034/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The revenue raised from the SDIL is not set aside by the UK Government to be used to address specific issues and is received as an increase to the Northern Ireland Block Grant to be distributed across NI Departments by the Department of Finance.

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Health what conversations he has had with his counterparts in the UK Government regarding aid that can be given to India to help with the pandemic.

(AQW 18071/17-22)



**Mr Swann:** I have been in discussion with my counterparts in the UK Government regarding the UK's response to India's COVID-19 crisis. As has been announced I offered three Oxygen Pressure Swing Absorption generator sets and these have been gratefully accepted. In addition I can confirm that NI is providing more than 500,000 lateral flow device tests to support the UK aid package.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of missed medical appointments in each of the past three years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

**(AQW 18097/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Data relating to outpatient activity, including the number of appointments patients missed/did not attend (DNA), are published annually by financial year. The number of missed outpatient appointments, known as DNAs (Did Not Attend) is defined as 'the number of patients who did not attend, and failed to give advance warning to the hospital, for an outpatient appointment. This includes patients who cancelled their outpatient appointment on the same day on which the appointment was scheduled. These should not be confused with those who could not attend and who did warn the hospital in advance (before the day on which the appointment was scheduled)'.

The most recent publication was released in August 2020 and can be found at the following link:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/hospital-statistics-outpatient-activity-statistics-201920>.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of missed outpatient appointments in the past three years by HSC Trust.

**Table 1 Number of missed outpatient appointments in each of the past three years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust**

HSC Trust	2018/19	2019/20	April 2020 – December 2020*
Belfast	52,903	56,529	17,210
Northern	11,881	12,126	4,048
South Eastern	22,754	22,416	7,330
Southern	18,648	16,395	4,041
Western	20,140	19,778	7,438
<b>Total</b>	<b>126,326</b>	<b>127,244</b>	<b>40,067</b>

\*Data is provisional. Data for January to March 2021 is not available yet.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to integrate community pharmacy into electronic solutions to support patient care, including repeat prescriptions; and to detail the level of capital funding to support this initiative.

**(AQW 18100/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Work has begun on a programme of work, led by the Health and Social Care Board to consider options for replacement of the current written prescription system with an electronic prescribing system. This aims to improve the patient experience by streamlining the entire prescribing and dispensing process.

As this work is still at a relatively early stage, it is not possible to detail the level of capital funding that will be needed to support this initiative although it is hoped that we may be in a position to possibly identify and procure a suitable IT solution to progress this programme of work during 2022 thus enabling the project to move into implementation during 2023 at the earliest.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health to outline the services that his Department is providing in partnership with the Department for Communities in tackling poverty and deprivation.

**(AQW 18111/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Department of Health works in partnership with the Department for Communities on a range of issues relating to poverty and deprivation.

These include;

#### **Health Inequalities**

The work of the PHA to improve health and wellbeing and tackle health inequalities. This work specifically recognises and targets those groups and communities where poverty is likely to be a significant factor such as those who experience homelessness, people with a disability and people with mental health problems.

The Public Health Agency has developed a short, medium and long-term plan for the post pandemic recovery of health improvement services, the majority of which are focussed in the most deprived communities.

Some examples are investment projects to improve levels of physical activity, smoking cessation, stress reduction, breastfeeding and nutrition, fuel poverty and food poverty.

The PHA works closely with DfC on these initiatives.

### **Homelessness**

My Department also works in partnership with the DfC on Homelessness and contributes to the DfC led inter-departmental Homelessness Strategy. Work to date has included the establishment and expansion of a health hub in the Belfast area for those experiencing homelessness and the development of a Homelessness Practice Framework for the social work profession in NI.

Specific pandemic related guidance was also developed for homelessness service providers.

My Department is represented on a newly established joint DfC/PHA/HSCB/DoH strategic planning group for homelessness which aims to ensure a more cohesive and collaborative Departmental/HSC approach,

One example of the work of this group, and jointly funded with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and co-ordinated by Council for the Homeless NI, was the procurement and distribution of an additional 446 Home Starter Packs and 1130 'Getting Started' boxes by the PHA.

### **Anti-Poverty Cross Departmental Strategy**

My Department is working collaboratively with DfC on the development of a Cross-departmental strategy on poverty as agreed in the New Decade, New Approach document.

### **Child Poverty**

My Department continues to work in partnership with the Department for Communities to implement the relevant actions from the Executive's Child Poverty Strategy which aims to reduce the number of children in poverty and reduce the impact of poverty on children. Action 3.2 from the strategy is to provide support for families through Family Support Hubs. A Family Support Hub is a multi-agency network of statutory, community and voluntary organisations who work in local areas to provide early intervention services locally to help families address a range of issues, such as poor attachment or engagement with baby; improving the level of play/communication; poverty; and substance misuse. There are 29 Family Support Hubs (FSHs) operational in NI.

Between 1 April and 31 December 2020, 5,731 families were referred for support services to the Family Support Hubs.

My Department is also leading on the development of a cross-Departmental Family and Parenting Support Strategy which will, among other things, support families living in poverty to alleviate the impact of living in poverty on family life.

### **Anti-Poverty Practice for Social Work**

My Department launched the Anti-Poverty Practice Framework for Social Workers in NI in July 2018. DfC and the advice sector partnered with us in this work. The anti-poverty practice framework aims to support social workers in NI to recognise and respond to the impact of poverty on individuals, families and communities. My Department continues to promote and embed this into social work practice.

### **Financial Wellbeing**

My Department has also worked with the DfC on The implementation of the UK wide Strategy for Financial Wellbeing in NI. This work led to a collaboration with DfC and the Money and Pensions Advice Service to provide money guidance knowledge and skills to social workers and social care workers. Successful awareness training has been delivered by webinar and a further rollout of training is planned. In addition, we will support an additional cohort of social workers and social care workers to develop more advanced skills.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to detail the guidance his Department has on the use of the Big Word translation service in relation to Health and Social Care.

**(AQW 18116/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The responsibility for procurement and use of translation services within the Health and Social Care sector lies with the Interpreting Service in the Business Services Organisation (BSO).

The use of translation services in my Department is governed through the Framework for interpretation, translation and transcription services | Department of Finance ([finance-ni.gov.uk](http://finance-ni.gov.uk)) This is an arrangement put in place and managed by the Department of Finance Construction Procurement and Delivery (CPD) Division. It applies across the Northern Ireland public sector. Big Word is currently listed on the Framework as the contractor for Telephone Interpreting Services.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the COVID-19 Recognition Payments for (i) health and social care staff; and (ii) unpaid carers.

**(AQW 18127/17-22)**

**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 schemes for HSC staff and carers, to enable payment as soon as possible. As soon as any further information is available, it will be published on the FAQ.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Health whether his Department (i) will review urgently the absence of emergency dental care at weekends; and (ii) work to reinstate this service as soon as possible.

**(AQW 18131/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Emergency dental care continues to be available at weekends. As per the General Dental Services Regulations, dentists are required to make reasonable arrangements to ensure that a patient requiring prompt care and treatment will receive such care and treatment as soon as appropriate. This may involve participation in an organised rota or provision of out of hours care by the practitioner themselves. While large scale Relief of Dental Pain Clinic rotas are currently suspended, access to emergency dental care remains good due to small scale rotas and practices providing their own emergency cover.

During the pandemic it has been necessary to establish Urgent Dental Care Centres (UDCCs) to cater for suspected or confirmed Covid positive patients requiring dental treatment, patients with genuine dental emergencies and unregistered patients unable to obtain care from any other provider. These UDCCs draw upon much of the same service capacity and infrastructure that was available for Relief of Dental Pain Clinics pre-pandemic. It is therefore not possible at this time to return to the out of hours dental care model that was in place prior to the pandemic.

The Health and Social Care Board has recently produced a report examining future options for out of hours dental care. In developing the report, the Board team met with local dentists' representatives from across Northern Ireland. The completed report has very recently been shared with the Dental Practice Committee of the British Dental Association (BDA) and the BDA have been given the opportunity to provide feedback.

As the prevalence Covid-19 continues to fall the need for the Urgent Dental Care Centres will be kept under review and my officials will work with the Board and the BDA to ensure out of hours dental service arrangements meet the needs of patients and practitioners alike.

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Health whether he will undertake a review of the maternity leave available to Health Service staff with a view of enhancing the contractual pay available.

**(AQW 18137/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Maternity leave forms part of the terms and conditions for staff, agreed nationally at the NHS Staff Council. There are no plans currently to review this locally.

Under current terms and conditions, an expectant mother is entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave, the first eight of which are paid at a rate equivalent to full pay, the next eighteen weeks are paid at half pay plus any Statutory Maternity Pay or maternity allowance, and a final thirteen weeks attract Statutory Maternity pay or maternity allowance. Any further weeks are unpaid.

I am aware of a recent amendment to the Agenda for Change Handbook which clarifies the position on consecutive periods of maternity, but this provision is already applied in NI.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health, given the standing-down of the Health and Social Care Board, how he will ensure that the services and funding for community pharmacy services will be developed further after March 2022.

**(AQW 18192/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department recognises the need to have a stable and sustainable network of community pharmacies, commissioned to provide services which contribute to population level improvements in health and HSC reform. Significant progress has been made over the last few years to agree a contractual framework of pharmacy services, strategically aligned to 'Delivering Together'. My Department is continuing to work and engage positively and collaboratively with Community Pharmacy NI to develop a roadmap for the long term future of community pharmacy services. This collaborative working has in the short term contributed to the agreement of 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 Easton** asked the Minister of Health to detail the average waiting time for a GP appointment.

**(AQW 18212/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** This information is not available. As independent contractors, GP practices are responsible for managing their own appointment systems and waiting times.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of GP vacancies in each Health and Social Care Trust.

**(AQW 18214/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Information on the number of vacant GP posts is not available. GPs are independent contractors who contract with the Health and Social Care Board to provide primary medical services to their patients. As independent contractors, GPs are responsible for identifying and recruiting the number of GPs and other staff required to deliver those services.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health on what date the Independent Review into the resignation of board members of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority will be published.  
(AQW 18246/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** My Department will publish the recommendations and findings of the Independent Review into the resignation of board members of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority in the coming weeks.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the legalisation of medicinal marijuana in Northern Ireland.  
(AQW 18273/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The law changed on 1 November 2018 to allow doctors on the specialist register of the General Medical Council to prescribe cannabis-based medicinal products (CBMPs) where clinically appropriate. Specialist clinicians can now decide to prescribe CBMPs taking into account the clinical evidence available to them, the potential risks and benefits of the treatment and in line with the individual circumstances of the patient.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published Clinical Guidelines to support clinicians on the prescribing of CBMPs for people with intractable nausea and vomiting, chronic pain, spasticity and severe treatment resistant epilepsy. My Department has formally endorsed this guidance for implementation by Health and Social Care providers in Northern Ireland.

## Department for Infrastructure

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what support is available to connect domestic and commercial and residential dwellings in rural areas to essential utilities such as sewerage, water and electricity services.  
(AQW 17517/17-22)

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** Water and sewerage services fall within the remit of my Department and I will respond to those elements of your question. Electricity services fall within the remit of the Department for the Economy and you may wish to direct this question to the Minister for Economy.

A customer who applies to NI Water for a water main and/or sewer network requisition may be entitled to a reasonable cost allowance to assist with the cost of this. A requisition is a request for an extension of the public water main (or sewer network) to service a new property/properties, an existing property/properties or a new development. The allowance for an existing property, built before 1 January 2000, is £12,000 towards the cost of a water main requisition. The allowance for properties built after 1 January 2000 is £1,600 towards the cost of a water main requisition. The higher reasonable cost allowance is provided under the Department's Targeting Social Needs objective to assist isolated, and older, rural dwellings, primarily because of their distance from the road and nearest water main. These allowances are available to extend the water main in cases where there is no main within 20 metres of a property. The equivalent figures for the sewer reasonable cost allowance are £2,500 for new properties constructed after 1st January 2000 and £4,000 for existing properties constructed pre 1st January 2000. Both water and sewerage reasonable cost allowances are only available to domestic customers for domestic purposes. Further information on the reasonable cost allowance and connection costs can be found in NI Water's Scheme of Charges 2020/21, which is approved by the Utility Regulator (Microsoft Word - NI Water 2021-22 Scheme of Charges Final v2).

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail how much has been spent on the York Street Interchange Project, in each of the last ten years.  
(AQW 17518/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** The following table provides a breakdown of the annual spend to date on the York Street Interchange in each of the last ten years.

Financial Year	£k
2011/12	602
2012/13	877
2013/14	850
2014/15	1,523
2015/16	3,250
2016-17	1,073

Financial Year	£k
2017-18	4,936
2018-19	2,380
2019-20	1,639
2020-21	2,344
<b>Total</b>	<b>19,474</b>

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail how many kilometers of pop up cycle lanes were installed since the onset of COVID-19.

**(AQW 17533/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Since the onset of the pandemic my Department has installed 1.8 km of pop-up cycle lanes as follows:

Two-way pop-up cycle lane: Bankmore Street – Hardcastle Street – Marcus Ward Street – Dublin Road, Belfast	0.5 km
Two-way pop-up cycle lane: Grosvenor Road, Belfast	0.5 km
One-way pop-up cycle lane, Donegall Road (north side), Belfast	0.4 km
One-way pop-up cycle lane, Donegall Road (south side), Belfast	0.4 km

In addition to this, my Department has delivered 13.7 km of other active travel infrastructure including the Blaris Greenway Path and shared footway / cycleway schemes at various locations across the North.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the targets in the new road safety strategy for reducing those killed or seriously injured.

**(AQW 17674/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Work on the Road Safety Strategy had been impacted by the Covid-19 crisis and the prioritisation of resources to the work on the Financial Assistance Schemes however officials continue to work on it at pace.

In developing the new Road Safety Strategy, officials are engaging with key stakeholders in advance of a formal consultation on issues such as targets. The draft Road Safety Strategy will be issued as soon as possible but I can assure you that road safety is integral to the work of the Department and it continues each and every day with initiatives such as the 20 mph scheme at schools; the road safety grant scheme; the introduction of tougher penalties for mobile phone use while driving; and enforcement actions by the DVA, in collaboration with the PSNI. There are also regular meetings with the Chief Constable on road safety.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of what role the introduction of lateral flow testing for examiners and candidates could have in accelerating the reduction of the backlog in driving tests.

**(AQW 17706/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am advised that officials from the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) reviewed the criteria supplied by the Department of Health for the selection of organisations and services that would benefit from the rollout of an Asymptomatic Testing Programme for Covid-19, including the use of Lateral Flow Tests with the general public who would be in close contact with DVA staff attending a driving or MOT test.

After careful consideration the DVA decided that it would not be practical to include driving examiners and driving test candidates within this scheme as it would inevitably result in fewer tests being conducted each day and, as a consequence, increase waiting times for driving tests.

The DVA will continue to deliver driving tests in adherence with its risk assessments to ensure the necessary Covid-19 controls are implemented throughout the testing process. The appropriate mitigations proposed by the DVA went through the Executive taskforce process which included advice from the Department of Health, to enable driving tests to resume on 23 April 2021. 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 Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what level of economic activity will be included within her plans for the further development of the Comber Greenway.

**(AQW 17733/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My announcement in September 2020 of £3.7 million capital funding for greenways across Northern Ireland underlines my commitment to assist Councils and others in the development of greenways across Northern Ireland.

In terms of the Comber Greenway, the Member will be aware of plans to conduct a public consultation on lighting. I am also keen that better links to and from communities be developed for all greenways.

Developing economic activity would also involve the relevant Council in respect of Street Trading Designations and street trading licences. At present there are no plans to develop economic activity on the Comber Greenway.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of total mass emissions of NO<sub>x</sub>, PM<sub>10</sub>, PM<sub>2.5</sub> and carbon dioxide from roads in the York Street Interchange scheme (i) now; (ii) in the assumed year of opening; and (iii) the design year. **(AQW 17735/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The Environmental Statement (ES) for the York Street Interchange scheme was published in January 2015. Chapter 8 of the ES presented an assessment of the likely effects of the current scheme on local and regional air quality (including NO<sub>x</sub>, PM<sub>10</sub>, PM<sub>2.5</sub> and carbon dioxide) in the base year and assumed opening year and design year.

In the assumed year of opening and the design year, predicted annual mean concentrations of Nitrogen Dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>), Particulate Matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub> and PM<sub>10</sub>) would be below National Air Quality Objective Values at all assessed sensitive receptors for both the Do-Minimum and Do-Something scenarios. The scheme would reduce yearly emissions of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>e – expressed as tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent) by 190 tonnes in the opening year and 208 tonnes in the design year.

Further information is available in the ES which can be found at: <http://yorkstreetinterchange.com/environmental-statement.html>

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the impact on air quality in relation to the York Street Interchange scheme. **(AQW 17736/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The Environmental Statement (ES) for the York Street Interchange scheme was published in January 2015 and reported the findings of the completed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the scheme. Chapter 8 of the ES included an assessment of the impacts upon regional and local air quality.

This assessment concluded that, in overall terms, the current scheme's effect on regional air quality would be beneficial but not significant.

Further information is available in the ES which can be found at: <http://yorkstreetinterchange.com/environmental-statement.html>

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the additional emissions of carbon dioxide which would be released into the atmosphere in the design year of the York Street Interchange scheme which would not otherwise be released. **(AQW 17738/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The Environmental Statement (ES) for the York Street Interchange scheme was published in January 2015 and reported the findings of the completed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the scheme. Chapter 8 of the ES included an assessment of the impacts upon regional and local air quality.

The ES details predicted carbon dioxide emissions in the assumed design year under 'Do-Minimum' conditions, which is the scenario that represents the situation that would occur without the scheme in operation and predicted carbon dioxide emissions in the assumed design year under 'Do-Something' conditions, which is the scenario that represents the situation that would occur with the scheme in operation.

Comparison of the data in the two scenarios indicates that the current scheme is predicted to reduce carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>e – expressed as tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent) by 208 tonnes for the design year.

Further information is available in the ES which can be found at: <http://yorkstreetinterchange.com/environmental-statement.html>

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider free or reduced cost parking to incentivise the purchase of electric vehicles. **(AQW 17774/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** 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 which came into operation on 21 December 2020, to make it easier to expand the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles;
- 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.

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. My officials are also considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure and will continue to liaise with ESB to consider any specific requests to ensure the public network can meet the needs of EV owners now and in future. ESB currently does not charge e-car drivers for the use of its public charge points in Northern Ireland.

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.

Electric vehicles will play an important part in decarbonising transport and a number of other incentives are also in place to encourage the uptake of EVs. The Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) provides funding to support the early market for ultra-low emission vehicles (ULEVs) in Great Britain and Northern Ireland including grants for plug-in cars, vans, taxis and motorcycles in addition to grants for home and workplace charging infrastructure.

Action to decarbonise transport, improve air quality and reduce congestion, will also require prioritising measures that reduce vehicle kilometres and encourage walking, cycling and public transport as primary modes of travel in our towns and cities. In addition, by reducing the space allocated to vehicles in town centres, we can create cleaner, greener places that are more attractive for people. Therefore, provision of free or reduced cost parking, whether for electric vehicles or otherwise, is not 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 Bunting** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration she has given to improving the Grahamsbridge Road/Comber Road/Old Dundonald Road junction.

**(AQW 17804/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As you will appreciate, the Comber Road/Grahamsbridge Road/Old Dundonald Road junction is very busy, especially during peak traffic periods.

Back in 2015 my Department commissioned a study to consider a number of possible options to improve the junction, including the provision of traffic signals. The study examined signalling the junction to varying degrees, including some and all of the movements and concluded that it would take major reconstruction of the junction before a layout could be found that would operate safely and within capacity. As such, I am advised that it is estimated a scheme at this location would cost in excess of £1M and other schemes in the Division have been assessed as scoring a higher priority for inclusion in a works programme at this time under current funding levels.

My Department considers that on balance the existing layout is the best that can be achieved at this time.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment of her Department's current verge cutting program in relation to the biodiversity crisis; (ii) whether she will consider a 'Don't Mow, Let It Grow' policy where safe to do so.

**(AQW 17815/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department manages vegetation across our network in a number of ways, with the primary aim of maintaining road safety while also protecting wildlife and taking great care in maintaining their habitats. In this regard our current grass cutting policy seeks to achieve a balance between road safety, the control of noxious weeds and environmental protection.

As you are aware my Department has been engaged in the 'Don't Mow Let It Grow' (DMLIG) pilot project in conjunction with Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council, Northern Ireland Environment Agency and others. This project is continuing on after its initial 3 year pilot period. Through this work, my Department has increased its understanding of the importance of road verges for biodiversity and is now engaging with a number of councils and others to consider how the lessons learned from DMLIG can be integrated into transport corridors.

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 Northern Ireland, my Department is committed to reviewing its environmental policies to promote pollinator-friendly practices and to encourage their inclusion on road schemes, where practicable.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) how many charging points are currently out of service; and (ii) the expected repair time for each charge point.

**(AQW 17827/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The electric vehicle public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). It is responsible for the operation, maintenance and development of the network. ESB can be contacted, in respect of the issues you have raised, at [ecars@esb.ie](mailto:ecars@esb.ie) or enquiries can be sent directly to ESB, Two Gateway, East Wall Road, DUBLIN 3, D03 A995.

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 Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's investment in cycle lanes in Newry and Armagh since 2019.

**(AQW 17828/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The following active travel facilities have been constructed by my Department within Southern Division, i.e. within the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council areas since 2019.

Year	Scheme	Type of facility provided	Length (km)
2018/19	Moy Road, Scotch Street, Portadown	New toucan crossing	-
	Carbane Way, Newry	New toucan crossing	-
	Shepherds Way, Newry	New toucan crossing	-
	Carnbane Way / Shepherds Way, Newry	Shared walking / cycling	1.7
2020/21	Nursery Road, Armagh	Shared walking / cycling	0.3
		<b>Total length (km)</b>	<b>2.0</b>

Details of these schemes are readily available in the reports presented to Council each year which are available here: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/type/corporatereports>

My Department continues to encourage local councils to identify active travel opportunities that will help deliver sustainable positive change, particularly in the context of recovery from COVID 19, and they can apply for support in doing so from my Blue Green Infrastructure Fund.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department is exploring ways to help prospective taxi drivers complete their examinations.

**(AQW 17829/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Following the Executive's decision on 15 April to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place.

Driver theory testing, including taxi theory testing, has resumed 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.

All categories of practical driving tests, including taxi driver tests, resumed from 23 April, with the booking service opening 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 DVA is planning to open the last phase of the booking system in mid-May, after which all customers will be provided with the opportunity to book a test.

I acknowledge that prospective taxi drivers are keen to take their practical driving and theory tests at the earliest opportunity and I can assure you that the DVA continues to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots, through extended opening hours, the provision of additional examiners and new temporary test centres.

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 Givan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration has been given to the removal of on-street parking charges in Lisburn.

**(AQW 17835/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am very aware that the management and operation of the road network has a wide range of impacts across businesses, communities and the environment. I am also aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed town centres in



general, and commercial businesses in particular, under considerable pressure, in Lisburn and elsewhere. As we emerge from COVID, I am determined that we must focus on sustainable and community enhancing solutions.

The most appropriate way to review the parking of vehicles in the city centre will be within the Transport Plan prepared in conjunction with the Local Development Plan. The Transport Plan will require the Department and the Council to jointly prepare a Parking Strategy which will consider the provision, management and operation of all parking in Lisburn, both on and off street in conjunction with other modes of transport.

In the meantime, as we emerge from COVID lockdown, I am very conscious of a renewed interest in how street space in our towns and cities can best be utilised, to promote the objectives of commercial vitality and improved local public spaces. Changing our current approach to the management of parking by promoting free on-street parking is likely to result in an increase in town centre vehicular traffic, which would work against these shared objectives.

In addition, making on-street car parking more attractive than off-street parking will rule out the possibility of creating footway extensions, hospitality spill-out areas, and parklets. These measures have proved popular elsewhere, and I believe that traders and businesses in Lisburn city centre stand to gain more from these positive place-making measures than from free on-street parking. I have supported all of these measures through the COVID Revitalisation Fund and will continue to do so through my Blue Green Infrastructure Fund.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the adoption of Orandale, Strabane.  
(AQW 17857/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** The Orandale residential development in Strabane comprises thirty dwellings, all of which have now been constructed and are occupied. The developer entered into separate bond agreements with both DfI Roads and NI Water in 2008, however, regrettably has refused to complete the road and sewerage infrastructure works despite numerous requests from both DfI Roads and NI Water. NI Water has confirmed that significant remedial works are necessary after which the roads and footways will require a final bitmac wearing course.

NI Water has served enforcement papers on the developer and has a contractor ready to move on site. On 26 April 2021 the developer indicated that he will now carry out all necessary repairs to the sewerage infrastructure and NI Water has set a deadline of 1 June 2021 to have these works complete. DfI Roads has also quantified and costed outstanding works and, should the developer not complete all works on the site, is ready to complete road works under enforcement after all NI Water works are complete.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the adoption of Nancy's Lane, Strabane.  
(AQW 17858/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** As you may be aware, Nancy's Lane is just over 500m in length with the first 180m adopted and maintained by my Department. However the remainder of the road is in private ownership and currently does not meet a standard required for adoption.

My officials have previously apprised public representatives and the residents of the standard the road would have to be brought to up to enable my Department to adopt it and that the associated costs would have to be borne by the residents.

My Department has received no recent communication regarding proposals to improve the standard of the road however my officials remain willing to engage with the residents and/or public representatives to clarify any aspects of the works that would be required.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 4187/17-22, whether it was the Department's expressed position in court that there is, or is not, a physical overlap between the location of the existing settlement lagoons and the site of the proposed new lagoons.  
(AQW 17897/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** You will be aware following my response of 3 June 2020 to AQW 4187/17-22 that I wrote to you directly on 10th July 2020 in relation to this matter (reference TOF-2011-2020). As previously advised the authoritative position on the issue is as stated by Treacy J in paragraph 94 of his judgment in [2014] NIQB 34.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure why 30 Balligan Gardens, Bangor was left without running water by contractors over the weekend of 24 April 2021.  
(AQW 17913/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** NI Water has advised me that, following inspection of the public supply network to this address and surrounding area, no issues have been found with its infrastructure which could have contributed to the disruption of running water to this address.

There are ongoing housing refurbishment works in the vicinity, not related to my Department, which may have contributed to the disruption of running water to this address.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure why Virgin Media have been allowed to virtually close the entire main road network in Donaghadee causing long queues and delays of up to an hour last week without any proper traffic management. (AQW 17914/17-22)

**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.

I am aware that there is a large investment currently being undertaken by utility companies in Donaghadee which has led to some traffic delays. My officials have worked with the utility companies in an effort to minimise the impact of the ongoing works while still facilitating the important upgrades to the local infrastructure. Virgin Media is responsible for the provision of the traffic management associated with its sites and any concerns in this respect should be directed to the PSNI for enforcement.

The report of a one hour delay to which you refer is the only record of such delays my Department has received. While some delays from such works are unavoidable, my officials have been in Donaghadee regularly during this period and I am advised any delays experienced were not considered to be excessive. Given the absence of other reports about significant delays, it appears that this may have been an isolated incident. I would welcome additional information of any other incidents that you might have for my officials to investigate.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a list of all streets currently waiting for traffic calming measures across North Down. (AQW 17915/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I can confirm that my officials are currently developing plans for the delivery of a range of Local Transport and Safety Measures, including schemes for the Ards and North Down Council area.

When the budget is confirmed, the annual works programme will be finalised with details included in the annual report provided to Ards and North Down Council, before it is published online.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on traffic calming measures for Ballyree Drive, Bangor. (AQW 17916/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** As I advised in my response to your previous question on this matter, my officials are considering the introduction of traffic calming measures at this location. Once budgets and works programme for 2021/22 have been finalised, details will be included in a report that my Department will issue to Ards and North Down Council and which will be made publicly available thereafter.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what can her Department do to help stop the illegal parking on Church Road and Fort Road, Helens Bay. (AQW 17917/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** Unfortunately, popular local areas of interest such as Helen's Bay have limited parking opportunities and therefore significant increases in visitor numbers exceed the available capacity at many of these sites, which inevitably leads to traffic progression and road safety issues on the network. Consequently, my Department has introduced waiting restrictions in the form of double yellow lines to facilitate traffic progression and improve road safety for all road users travelling in this area.

Due to the reduced traffic volumes using our roads, I took the decision to scale back the parking enforcement service during this difficult time. However, parking restrictions remain in place, and a small team of Traffic Attendants continue to be deployed on a priority basis to locations where they can contribute most to road safety and traffic progression. The Department has ensured there is flexibility in its approach and, if required, the number of Traffic Attendants can be increased. As a result, the level of parking enforcement in the Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn areas increased from 15 March 2021.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her Department's Cycle Unit's assessment of urban shared footways. (AQW 17920/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** My Department may make use of the following guidance documents for cycling infrastructure:

- London Cycling Design Standards (LCDS);
- Design Guidance Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013;
- 'Cycling by Design' Transport Scotland 2011;
- Department for Transport Local Transport Note (LTN) 1/20: Cycle Infrastructure Design.

The most recent of these, Local Transport Note (LTN) 1/20, Cycling Infrastructure Design, was published by the Department for Transport in July 2020. In line with the guidance, my Department strives to provide segregated space for walking and cycling. However, the guidance indicates that shared space may be appropriate where pedestrian numbers are very low and these are the locations where we have considered such provision. In addition, in the construction of both walking and cycling infrastructure we aim to provide effective separation from motor traffic.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how the development of the York Street Interchange fits with the Executive's and Assembly's commitments to reduce carbon emissions.

**(AQW 17924/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement commits the Executive to tackling climate change with a strategy to address the immediate and longer term impacts of climate change and creating legislation and targets for reducing carbon emissions in Northern Ireland in line with the Paris Climate Change Accord.

In anticipation of these targets, my Department has been progressing a range of initiatives to increase the use of public transport and facilitate modal shift to more sustainable travel options, including encouraging the uptake of walking, cycling and use of public transport. I have provided investment for a sustainable bus replacement programme for Translink to replace older vehicles with cleaner, more fuel efficient buses. My officials are working with councils to develop Local Transport Plans to encourage the designation of zones for development that incorporate sustainable transport options and multi-modal urban transport schemes. These climate change mitigation actions will help to reduce carbon emissions. In addition, I am working with Executive colleagues to tackle critical climate change, energy and air quality challenges in a holistic and coordinated way.

As Infrastructure Minister, I am committed to supporting a transition to carbon neutrality within the areas of my responsibility in contribution to achieving the net zero target as quickly as possible. I want to ensure that in progressing major road schemes, we are taking the necessary steps to keep global warming well below 2 degrees, as outlined in the 2015 Paris Agreement.

Strategic Roads move people and goods therefore have to balance economic and environmental issues as well as ensuring the scheme delivers for the people who live around it. The Environmental Statement (ES) for the current York Street Interchange scheme looks at a range of environmental impacts, including air quality. This was published in January 2015 and reported the findings of the completed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the scheme. Chapter 8 of the ES included an assessment of the impacts upon regional and local air quality.

The ES details predicted carbon dioxide emissions in the assumed design year under 'Do-Minimum' conditions, which is the scenario that represents the situation that would occur without the scheme in operation and predicted carbon dioxide emissions in the assumed design year under 'Do-Something' conditions, which is the scenario that represents the situation that would occur with the scheme in operation. The assumed design year is 15 years after the assumed opening year and is used for comparison purposes.

Comparison of the data in the two scenarios indicates that the scheme is predicted to reduce carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>e – expressed as tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent) by 208 tonnes for the design year. This shows that York Street Interchange will very slightly reduce carbon emissions, thereby contributing to an overall reduction in carbon emissions.

Further information is available in the ES which can be found at: <http://yorkstreetinterchange.com/environmental-statement.html>

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of road safety on the Cootehall Road, Crawfordsburn.  
**(AQW 17970/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department has implemented a number of traffic management measures on Cootehall Road aimed at increasing motorists' awareness of the presence of the Primary School, and the likelihood of encountering children and parents in the area. These measures include flashing school signs, high friction surfacing and associated road markings outside the school. I am advised these measures have helped to reduce vehicle speeds and improve road safety in this area.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on when the further tranche of funding for installing part-time speed limits at schools for this financial year will be released; and (ii) how much is budgetted for the 2021/22 financial year for implementing 20mph speed limit zones outside primary schools.

**(AQW 17971/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Following Executive agreement of the final budget for 2021-22, I am carefully considering my funding allocations. I want to build on the success of the first tranche of funding which delivered part-time 20 mph speed limits at 103 schools across Northern Ireland. I can confirm my commitment to take forward a further tranche of funding for part-time 20mph speed limits zones outside schools in 2021-22.

While I have yet to make final decisions on the allocation of this year's budget, I am committed to a further roll-out of the scheme as it will increase driver awareness aimed at reducing vehicle speeds outside and near schools providing a safer environment for parents, children and staff as they go to and from school on a daily basis.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when will grass cutting start along the central reservations in North Down.  
**(AQW 17993/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I can confirm that my Department's grass cutting programme within the Ards and North Down area has commenced. To ensure the safety of our operatives and road users when grass cutting of central reservations is taking place, temporary traffic management arrangements have to be put in place which are still being finalised so I am unable to specify timings at this exact time.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when will weed spraying start for footpaths across North Down.  
(AQW 17994/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I can confirm that the weed spraying programme in the Ards and North Down Council area began in early May 2021.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether priority workers will be considered for priority driving tests.  
(AQW 17995/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** Following the Executive's decision on 15 April to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place.

The DVA has received a number of requests from key workers requesting that they reinstate a priority service for them to avail of early appointments. The DVA is working with the Department of Health on priority applications. However, those priority applications are restricted to key workers whose jobs are ancillary to medical, health or social care services and who need to drive for their work. If a critical worker meets these requirements, their employer must contact the DVA and identify staff in these priority groups. The DVA will then try to facilitate priority appointments for both theory and practical driving tests.

In addition to this, the DVA has, and continues, to work hard to increase its capacity to help meet the 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, July and August to accommodate more learners.

Driver theory testing has resumed 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 acknowledge that learner drivers are keen to take their practical driving and theory tests at the earliest opportunity and can assure you that the DVA will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what powers her Department has to compel non-departmental bodies to undertake repairs and reinstate footpaths that have been damaged.  
(AQW 17996/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** The most common non-departmental bodies carrying out works on public roads are utility companies who are responsible for permanent reinstatement of footpaths to an agreed specification. While utility companies usually engage contractors to carry out works on their behalf, the utility company is ultimately responsible for the reinstatement of the street.

For all utility companies, my Department applies the procedures for inspection of reinstatements and for dealing with reinstatement failures as set out in the Northern Ireland Road Authority and Utilities Committee (NIRAUC) Code of Practice for Inspections. When reinstatements are not carried out to an acceptable standard, defects are notified to the company responsible for repair. Where necessary, additional inspections are carried out by my officials, at the company's expense, to ensure the defects have been rectified.

**Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has plans to address the ongoing issue of on-street car parking in the Church Road area of Helens Bay, particularly during periods of good weather.  
(AQW 17999/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** Unfortunately, popular local areas of interest such as Helen's Bay have limited parking opportunities and therefore significant increases in visitor numbers exceed the available capacity at many of these sites which inevitably leads to traffic progression and road safety issues on the network. Consequently, my Department has introduced waiting restrictions in the form of double yellow lines to facilitate traffic progression and improve road safety for all road users travelling in this area.

Due to the reduced traffic volumes using our roads, I took the decision to scale back the parking enforcement service during this difficult time. However, parking restrictions remain in place, and a small team of Traffic Attendants continue to be deployed on a priority basis to locations where they can contribute most to road safety and traffic progression. My Department has ensured there is flexibility in its approach and, if required, the number of Traffic Attendants can be increased. As a result, the level of parking enforcement in the Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn areas increased from 15 March 2021.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the A1, what additional safety work south of Loughbrickland is being considered by her Department.

**(AQW 18002/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My officials are currently bringing forward the Transport Plan for the Regional Strategic Transport Network (RSTNTP). It will set out future investment and improvement for our strategic transport networks for road, rail and bus, to 2035 and reflect my commitment to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across the North. It will help to inform my priorities for future development of the main road networks including the A1. I expect to publish the draft RSTNTP for consultation towards the end of this year and I would welcome your views on improvements to the A1 South of Loughbrickland at that stage.

In the interim, my Department has recently commenced construction and installation of 5 CCTV cameras on the A1. These cameras will be used to monitor traffic, detect any hazardous conditions and identify any incidents on the network. Traffic Control Operators will then initiate action, when appropriate, such as issuing warnings and co-ordinating with PSNI and our contractors to return the network to a safe condition. Three of these cameras are located south of Loughbrickland at Sheepbridge, Carnbane and Lower Newtown Road. Based on our current programme construction will be completed and the cameras commissioned by mid-July 2021.

**Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what additional resources are being put into North Down to ensure the grass cutting is completed in 2021 on a more regular basis than twice in previous years on the road verges on all major roads in North Down, including the Holywood to Bangor A2 dual carriageway and the Bangor to Newtownards dual carriageway.

**(AQW 18008/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** During 2020-21 my Department continued to provide two cuts per season for both rural and urban areas.

Grass cutting is funded from the Resource Budget allocated to my Department. The 2021-22 baseline, non-Covid Resource Budget outcome when inflationary uplifts are taken into account, represents a real terms reduction which will require difficult decisions to be made. The level of service to be delivered during the current year is under consideration and will reflect the Resource budget allocation available to me as set out in Budget 2021-22.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of people in East Antrim waiting for a practical driving test appointment.

**(AQW 18017/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** At 30 April 2021, 344 people in the East Antrim area had booked a practical driving test appointment on the Driver & Vehicle Agency's booking system. The booking system does not hold information on those people that have not yet made an application for a test. It is therefore not possible to detail the number of people from East Antrim waiting for a practical driving test appointment at this time.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail all road surface improvement schemes planned for West Tyrone.

**(AQW 18031/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Listed below are details of the schemes planned for 2021/22 for West Tyrone, subject to the availability of budget and contractor resource:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| ■ U1802 Park Road, Strabane;                       | ■ B46 Crockanboy Road, Rouskey;          |
| ■ C677 Orchard Road, Strabane;                     | ■ B46 Creggan Road, Carrickmore;         |
| ■ Melmount Road Industrial Estate, Strabane;       | ■ U3009 Meelmore Drive, Strathroy;       |
| ■ U4004 Hillmount Grove, Strabane;                 | ■ U3009 Hunters Crescent;                |
| ■ B72 Fyfin Road / Strabane Road, Spamount;        | ■ U3019 Rogers Villas;                   |
| ■ C675 Kilclean Road, Castlederg;                  | ■ B46 Kilskeery Road;                    |
| ■ U4017 Ardnalee Park, Strabane;                   | ■ U3001 Dromore Road Retail Park, Omagh; |
| ■ C675 Killeter Road / Mournebeg Road, Castlederg; | ■ B122 Tattyreagh Road, Fintona;         |
| ■ U4552 Orr Park, Newtownstewart;                  | ■ B80 Tattymoyle Road; and               |
| ■ U4017 Lisnafin Park, Strabane;                   | ■ U3026 McIvor Villas, Killyclogher.     |
| ■ A5 Beltany Road (TRN);                           |  |

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department is considering a re-surfacing scheme for sections of Sherwood Parks and Sherwood Avenue, Newtownabbey.

**(AQW 18038/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am advised by officials that based on their condition, and when assessed against the many other competing resurfacing priorities across Antrim and Newtownabbey, it is unlikely that schemes at Sherwood Parks and Sherwood Avenue will be included in this year's resurfacing programme. However my officials will continue to carry out maintenance inspections on Sherwood Parks and Sherwood Avenue and any identified actionable defects will be repaired.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail when the last road safety assessment of Cootehall Road, Crawfordsburn was carried out by her Department, including its outcome.

**(AQW 18062/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I can confirm that the previous assessment of Cootehall Road was undertaken in October 2019, which indicated a scheme at this location remains a low priority when compared to other locations in the North Down area.

You will be aware that my Department has introduced a number of traffic management measures on Cootehall Road to advise motorists of the presence of the primary school and the possibility of encountering young people and parents in the area. These measures, which include flashing school signs, high friction surfacing and associated road markings outside the school, have enhanced driver awareness and helped to reduce vehicle speeds thus improving road safety in this area.

**Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will introduce one hour free parking opportunities in Newry city as per the recommendation of the Newry Business Improvement District.

**(AQW 18080/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The Member will be aware that I have already addressed queries regarding the removal of the Charged Parking Zone in Newry City Centre on several previous occasions.

I am very aware that the management and operation of the road network has a wide range of impacts across businesses, communities and the environment. I am also aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed town centres in general, and commercial businesses in particular, under considerable pressure, in Newry and elsewhere. As we emerge from COVID, I am determined that we must focus on sustainable and community enhancing solutions.

The most appropriate place to carry out a review of the controlled parking zones is within the development of my Department's Transport Plans. These will be developed in conjunction with each Council's Local Development Plan (LDP) Local Policies Plan. The Transport Plans will require my Department and each Council to jointly prepare a Parking Strategy, which will consider the provision, management and operation of all parking both on and off street. These strategies will also take account of the shared objectives for our towns and cities and for greater use of sustainable modes of transport including public transport, walking and cycling.

In the meantime, as we emerge from COVID lockdown, I am very conscious of the renewed interest in how street space in our towns and cities can best be utilised, to promote the objectives of commercial vitality and improved local public spaces. Changing our current approach to the management of parking by promoting free on-street parking is likely to result in an increase in town centre vehicular traffic, which would work against these shared objectives.

In addition, making on-street car parking more attractive than off-street parking will rule out the possibility of creating footway extensions, hospitality spill-out areas, and parklets. These measures have proved popular elsewhere, and I believe that traders and businesses in Newry city centre stand to gain more from these positive place-making measures than from free on-street parking. I have supported all of these measures through the COVID Revitalisation Fund and will continue to do so through my Blue Green Infrastructure Fund.

My senior officials have already met with the Managing Director of the Newry Business Improvement District about this matter. I would encourage all town and city stakeholders to consider how we can enhance the town centre experience for everyone as we lift the lockdown restrictions.

**Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail planning applications that are currently being processed specifically in relation to the agriculture industry; broken down by (i) farm type, including (a) pig (b) poultry (c) suckler (d) dairy; and (ii) farm size.

**(AQW 18098/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not collate or hold information about the agricultural industry broken down by farm type and size; however in order to be of assistance a list of live planning applications that have a development type 'agriculture' had been produced and this will be placed in the Assembly library. This list includes inter alia, pig, poultry and cattle houses, milking parlours, agricultural machinery and storage buildings, stables and slurry stores.

The applications listed are those which were in the planning system at 31st December 2020, which is in line with the Department's most recently published National Statistics

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether her Department has been consulted in relation to the Crawfordsburn Primary School new build construction project; and (ii) to detail the nature of the consultation.

**(AQW 18125/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I can confirm that my Department has not yet been consulted on the proposed new Crawfordsburn Primary School; however, my officials are aware that North Down and Ards Council Planning has received a Proposal of Application Notice for a new school. In the event that a planning application is submitted to North Down and Ards Council Planning, my Department, as a statutory consultee to the planning process, will be consulted at that stage.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will carry out an assessment for traffic calming on Dominic Street, Newry.  
(AQW 18128/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I have asked my officials to carry out an initial assessment of Dominic Street that will determine if any further safety measures are warranted. They will advise you directly of the outcome when the assessment has been completed.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the schools in North Down that are being considered currently for the 20mph scheme for this financial year.  
(AQW 18144/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** As previously advised, it is my intention to take forward a further tranche of part-time 20mph speed limits at schools. All schools across all council areas, including those in Ards and North Down, that do not already have part-time speed limits in place will be considered for inclusion in a future programme, the extent of which will be dependent upon the level of funding made available in the 2021-22 year.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the date on which the review of the speed limit in the vicinity of the Cotton will take place.  
(AQW 18145/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** As I advised in my most recent answer, my officials plan to undertake this speed limit review when Covid-19 restrictions have eased and traffic volumes appear to be more reflective of the levels expected in the future which ensure the findings are more accurate. You will also hopefully appreciate that due to the restrictions there is a backlog of similar requests so I am currently unable to confirm specific timings; however, I have instructed my officials to advise you directly of the outcome when the review has been completed.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of motorists in the last year who have travelled to other parts of the UK in order to get their car MOT tested.  
(AQW 18171/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) does not hold information on the number of motorists who travel to GB in order to get their car MOT tested.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the roads and pavements that are due for resurfacing or upgrade across North Down in this financial year.  
(AQW 18263/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** The resurfacing programmes for roads and pavements for 2021-22 will be finalised once I have taken decisions on my Department's opening budget allocation. Once finalised, details of schemes will be included in the DfI Roads Spring report presented to Ards and North Down District Council prior to general release.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has raised the issue of co-funding the A5 with her southern counterpart.  
(AQW 18284/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I want to take this opportunity to re-iterate my commitment to tackling regional imbalance, connecting communities and improving road safety. There are so many communities, particularly in rural parts west of the Bann, who can benefit from investment in the A5 Project.

I welcome the Irish Government's reaffirmation of its £75 million commitment to the A5 in 'New Decade, New Approach' and I have had useful discussions with the Irish Transport Minister, Minister Ryan and the Taoiseach on delivering on our shared commitments.

It is really good news that the Taoiseach announced last October 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 infrastructure initiatives including the A5, the Ulster Canal, the Narrow Water Bridge and cross-border greenways.

I am committed to continue working with the Irish Government to ensure delivery for our citizens across our island and I wrote to Minister Ryan on 16 March to advise him on the next steps for the A5 project. The North South Ministerial Council Transport Sectoral meeting on 5 May 2021 also received an update on the project. I look forward to continuing to work in partnership to deliver on this much-needed project for citizens across our island.

## Department of Justice

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many judicial review judgements are outstanding; and (ii) to list the time each judgement has been outstanding.

**(AQW 17479/17-22)**

**Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice):** The timing and delivery of court judgments are matters for the judiciary.

The Lord Chief Justice's Office publishes a list of reserved judgments on the Judiciary NI website. <https://www.judiciaryni.uk/publications/reserved-judgments>

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice to detail her legislative programme for the remainder of this Assembly Mandate.

**(AQW 17670/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Upon being appointed Minister of Justice in January 2020, I set out an ambitious legislative programme that involved a proposal to bring forward five separate Bills over the remainder of this mandate. I am pleased to advise as a result of the excellent work of the Office of Legislative Counsel, together with the concerted efforts of Departmental officials, that my plan is 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 a Justice Bill, previously referred to as 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.

**Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Justice whether all of the strategic priority areas in the Gillen Review implementation plan which had a delivery date of 2020 or quarter 1 of 2021, have been fully implemented,; and to detail all not implemented.

**(AQW 17687/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Whilst good progress has been made against all of the strategic priority areas in the Plan that had a delivery date of 2020 or quarter 1 of 2021, full implementation has not been achieved. Some of the delays have been linked to Covid-19, which has impacted on all sectors across Northern Ireland.

However, 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.

The strategic priority areas that have delivery dates of 2020 or quarter 1 of 2021 are:

- Strategic Priority Area 1 - Remote Evidence Centres – target date of Q4 2020
- Strategic Priority Area 3 – Case Progression Officers – Pilot extended to 2021
- Strategic Priority Area 5 - Support for child victims (including Child House “Barnahus” type Model) – target date “TBC as dependent on other initiatives, but Working Group by summer 2020”
- Strategic Priority Area 11 - Scoping work in relation to previous sexual history – target date of Q4 of 2020
- Strategic Priority Area 13 - Training – target date of Q4 of 2020

Further detail on progress against each of the strategic priority areas is set out below.

### **Strategic Priority Area 1 - Remote Evidence Centres**

The Implementation Plan (<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/the-gillen-review-implementation-plan.PDF>) stated that a “Remote Evidence Centre (Belfast) would be ready for use by the end of 2020”. This objective has been achieved with a temporary Remote Evidence Centre (REC) for Belfast now operational. In addition, a second temporary REC for the Craigavon area is also now operational.

Whilst the commitment in the Implementation Plan has been delivered within deadline, additional work is in train to further develop REC provision to fully meet Sir John's recommendations in this area. This includes work to establish a longer term facility in Belfast (Phase 2) and the strategic roll out of further REC facilities across Northern Ireland (Phase 3).



### **Strategic Priority Area 3 – Case Progression Officers**

The Implementation Plan indicated that the Case Progression Officers (CPOs) Pilot would be extended into 2021. This has been achieved.

CPOs have been introduced to ensure that all procedural or administrative matters in relation to Crown Court cases are being progressed by the relevant agencies and that, as far as possible, any blockages or impediments to effective case progression are addressed.

An evaluation of the pilot is scheduled for later this year and will assess the nature of the CPO role and how it can work within the criminal justice system.

Strategic Priority Area 5 - Support for child victims (including consideration of Child House "Barnahus" type Model)

This strategic priority area covers recommendations relating to support for child victims, including consideration of a "Barnahus" type model for Northern Ireland. Whilst the Implementation Plan's target of having a Working Group established by the summer of 2020 was not achieved, nonetheless there has been good progress made against individual workstreams that impact on support for children. This includes:

- a cross-departmental Steering Group has been commissioned to provide strategic direction and oversee the coordinated implementation of separate workstreams and projects to deliver the Gillen Review recommendations that could have a positive impact on children who are victims of serious offences, including sexual offences.
- a priority in 2021/22 is the development of a permanent protocol to extend and build on the good practice established through the judge-led voluntary protocol to expedite serious sexual offence cases involving children under 13, which has made a positive difference to the children and their families;
- development of a pilot to provide independent legal advice in cases involving child victims of serious sexual offences;
- we have already established temporary remote evidence facilities in Belfast and Craigavon which can provide for child witnesses to give evidence remotely, away from the court building. Phase 2 is now underway and will deliver a new Remote Evidence Centre in Belfast that will include bespoke facilities tailored to the needs of children;
- consideration is being given to the development of a pilot to test pre-recorded cross-examination and re-examination and pre-agreed questions;
- the Department is supporting PSNI to improve ABE practice and providing information to inform the review of ABE suites and technology; and
- consideration of a Barnahus-type model for Northern Ireland, which would bring all justice and therapeutic child services together under a single roof.

### **Strategic Priority Area 11 - Scoping work in relation to previous sexual history**

An initial exercise to scope the broader research requirements recommended by Sir John has been completed and an action plan is in place.

An application to the QUB 2021 Collaborative Studentship Competition has been successful, meaning that a post-graduate student will be made available to the Gillen Review Implementation Team for 3 years commencing in October 2021. This student will take forward a research piece in relation to Article 28 applications (to admit evidence of previous sexual history into court proceedings).

### **Strategic Priority Area 13 - Training**

A cross sectoral Gillen Strategic Training Group is in the final stages of developing a Learning Framework on key themes such as the impact of trauma, marginalised groups, disclosure, file quality, child rights, rape myths and human rights. The Framework proposes a range of training solutions for those involved in the justice system and how training will be evaluated in the short, medium and long term. It is hoped that the final version of the Learning Framework will be presented to the Criminal Justice Board for approval in June.

### **Strategic Priority Area 2 – Sexual Offences Legal Advice Pilot**

Although it has target date of Quarter 2 2021, DOJ has also launched ahead of schedule, a pilot scheme to provide publicly funded legal advice to adult complaints in serious sexual offence cases. The service provides free independent legal advice from the point victims report a crime, up to the commencement of the trial and was launched on 1 April 2021. It is funded by the Department of Justice and delivered by Victim Support NI.

Further work is underway to resolve issues to allow complainants to be represented in court which we hope can be introduced as a Phase 2 of the pilot. Work is also about to start on the development of an equivalent model for complainants who are children. This work will be led by the Support for Children Steering Group.

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.

**Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on when face-to-face prison visits may recommence.  
(AQW 17698/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** On 22 April the Northern Ireland Prison Service announced that in-person visits will be reintroduced with effect from 4 May, with the additional safeguards in place to mitigate against the risk of infection to both staff and those in our care. These safeguards will include restricting visits to one visitor over 16 years of age, using temperature checks and maintaining physical measures to minimise the risk of physical contact during a visit. The measures we are required to put in place significantly restrict our capacity and consequently we will continue to provide family virtual visits.

While only one person is permitted at this time, this and the other restrictions currently required are being kept under constant review and are consistent with visiting arrangements in other areas such as hospitals. While I recognise this is difficult for families, this is a cautious first step in the road to full recovery for our prisons.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Justice to detail the elements of the Tackling Paramilitarism Action Plan which will be used to investigate and help prevent further instances of the rioting and antisocial behaviour seen on Northern Ireland's streets in recent weeks.  
(AQW 17699/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** As the member will be aware, any investigations relating to criminal activity are an operational matter for the PSNI, and I respect the Chief Constable's operational independence on this matter.

It should also be noted that whilst members linked to paramilitary crime gangs have been present during some of the disorder, the PSNI have stated that there is no evidence of paramilitary orchestration of much of the violence we witnessed.

We are all aware that antisocial behaviour and rioting has a negative impact on a community and individuals, and has significant consequences for those who engage in it. It requires a collaborative response from across government in partnership with communities to support individuals at risk and to address underlying issues. I am pleased that there are many initiatives under the Tackling Paramilitarism, Crime and Organised Crime Programme which adopt that approach, and while these are not the only initiatives which will address the issues that we have seen in recent weeks, they have a role in addressing this behaviour.

The Programme is supporting a number of projects which focus on young people. These include early intervention projects, diversionary programmes, projects which provide direct support for those at risk, and multi-agency initiatives to co-ordinate efforts to support young people. These include the following projects: START led by Education Authority (EA); WRAP led by Department of Education; Aspire led by the Probation Board; Fresh Start Through Sport, CRISP, and Gallagh Family Support led by the Department for Communities; educational aspiration projects led by The Executive Office through Communities in Transition; the Mid and East Antrim Support Hub; and the Common Purpose initiative between EA and PSNI.

To supplement these interventions, place-based working will be developed further over the coming months and conversations have started with community partners to identify and work to address shared priorities there, some of which will have a positive impact on anti-community activity.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice when applications for the Troubles-related Incident Victims Payment scheme will open.  
(AQW 17779/17-22)

**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.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan published in July 2020, (i) to detail her assessment of its recommendations; (ii) what steps her Department intends to take in relation to its recommendations; and (iii) to outline how the recommendations are being factored into future Programme for Government outcomes.  
(AQW 17814/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** The COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan was published in July 2020 and a report with recommendations specific to my Department was received in February 2021.

The recommendations are currently being considered by officials alongside the work being led by the Department for Communities to develop a Gender Equality Strategy for the Executive as referenced in 'New Decade New Approach'.

I am due to meet with the report authors to discuss the departmental recommendations further in the coming weeks and have also raised with Executive colleagues the need to factor the report into the Covid Taskforce work on recovery. That work will in turn help inform priority areas and outcomes in the next Programme for Government.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department has commissioned any research regarding the mental health outcomes of women and girls that come into contact with the Justice System.  
(AQW 18020/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** My Department has not commissioned any research specifically in relation to the mental health outcomes of women and girls that come into contact with the 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 both of the aforementioned strategies.

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.

Many of those who come into contact with the justice system have a range of unmet or unidentified health needs, several 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.

**Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the policy the NI Prison Service follows in regards to body worn cameras. (AQW 18168/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** The Northern Ireland Prison Service, Body Worn Video Camera Policy, was implemented in 2019 following a successful trial of this technology.

The aim of the policy is to ensure that all staff involved in the deployment, use or storage of Body Worn Video Camera recording equipment or material are fully aware of the systems and procedures required.

## Department for the Economy

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for the Economy when all students can expect to have received the £500 Covid Disruption Payment.

(AQW 14922/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** The Covid Disruption Payments were intended to be paid to eligible students by the end of March 2021. The institutions managed the payment process to the students, and have now provided my Department with the following updates. The number of Queen's University students who are eligible for the Covid Disruption Payment is 17,928. By Wednesday 31 March, the payment had been issued to 17,693 students. Between Thursday 1 April and Friday 16 April, a further 141 Covid Disruption Payments were issued. Queen's University is continuing to engage with a further 94 students who have been advised of their eligibility, but have yet to provide the information required to facilitate the payment to them. Ulster University made the Covid Disruption Payment to 16,793 students before the end of March 2021. A further 275 students have since received their payments, bringing the current total to 17,068. Another 74 payments are expected to be paid on 26 and 27 April, bringing the total to 17,142. Another 344 students remain outstanding for payment. The delay for students receiving payment after the end of March has been due to students failing to supply the relevant information to facilitate payment. 897 students at St Mary's University College were eligible for a Covid Disruption Payment. 872 students received a payment on or before 31 March. 20 students received a payment in the period 1 April to 9 April. Issues surrounding incorrect bank details resulted in delays in getting the payment to the remaining students, but St Mary's are working to resolve the matter. All 865 Stranmillis students eligible for the £500 payment were paid by the end of March 2021.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will consider a version of the COVID-19 Productive Investment Capital Grant for businesses with a turnover of less than £500,000 per year.

(AQW 15781/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** The Productive Investment Capital Grant (PICG) scheme is managed and administered by Invest NI. PICG supports businesses to undertake productivity focused capital investments in response to the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure the best return on investment for the public funding available, the scheme is aimed at businesses with sufficient scale and resources to benefit from this support, hence the minimum turnover threshold of £500k per year and minimum investment requirement of £50k in capital, including new technology, software, automation or digital manufacturing technologies, to improve productivity. Due to the high level of interest in the PICG scheme, Invest NI is currently investigating scope for additional approvals and funding. It is possible that the scheme's eligibility criteria may be reviewed as part of this process.

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for the Economy, in the context of the COVID-19 economic recovery, whether she intends to provide additional financial support to facilitate new business start-ups.

(AQW 16762/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** On 25 February 2021, I published my Economic Recovery Action Plan which sets out the support that I will provide for companies and individuals in the medium term.

The Plan includes a number of initiatives which will support and promote new business start-ups. For example:

- Further support for the Catalyst Co-Founders Programme, an initiative which encourages new start-up companies by entrepreneurs, students and researchers;
- Continuing the NI Business Start-Up Programme, branded as Go for It, in which the Department will work in conjunction with DfC to set revised targets for the Programme, which provides advice and support to people seeking to start their own business;
- A refresh and relaunch of the Entrepreneurship Forum in which Invest NI will work along with partners and stakeholders such as Councils, Enterprise NI, Universities, Further Education Colleges and other stakeholders to better align and integrate support available for new start businesses across Northern Ireland; and
- A review of Invest NI's Entrepreneurship Action Plan which will pursue and develop commercial opportunities for export oriented start-ups and new entrepreneurs.

The actions above are additional to Invest NI's core work supporting start-up businesses through its extensive range of support including jobs related support; Propel Accelerator and Pre Accelerator Programmes; Grow Beyond Trade; From Student to First Sale; and Research & Development support. Invest NI is also working with stakeholders to develop a number of new initiatives to boost entrepreneurship across the wider economy, including underrepresented groups.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail plans to incentivise the private sector to invest in the green economy. (AQW 16962/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 16356/17-22.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister for the Economy how often reviews will be carried out to ensure that Northern Ireland is on target to meet her Department's ambition of achieving 70% renewable generation by 2030. (AQW 16963/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** The new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland will include the Executive's renewable electricity ambition. The strategy will be formally reviewed every five years, with mid-term reviews to assist with re-scoping priorities, re-assessing cost impacts and taking account of new technologies.

Reviews on progress of the previous 40% renewable electricity target by 2020 continues to be monitored on the basis of the proportion of electricity consumption generated from renewable sources, and outcomes are published by NISRA on a quarterly basis.

The methodology and frequency of monitoring for the new renewable electricity target will be dependent on the definition of the measure adopted and the frequency of supporting data. This will be informed by responses to the Energy Strategy consultation that was published on 31 March.

**Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for the Economy whether there is any financial help available to wholesalers of non-essential goods who have suffered financial loss due to the closures of retailers trading in goods that they supply. (AQW 17024/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** The NI Executive and the UK Government have introduced an unprecedented number of interventions and packages of financial support to help those who have been affected by the consequences of Covid-19. To date, the Department for the Economy has provided approximately £440 million of much needed funds to support to local businesses from all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland.

In recent months, this Department also introduced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS), which provides support for supply chain businesses under Part B. This includes businesses that supply the goods directly or via a wholesaler or intermediary. Those businesses who successfully applied will continue to receive financial support throughout any periods of extended closure.

The Finance Minister recently announced an additional £178 million of business support grants, and a further twelve months of rates relief for sectors most directly impacted by Covid-19 and the necessary restrictions imposed by the Executive.

Looking forward, I believe that the best way to support all of our local businesses is to re-open the economy, thus enabling all of our people to commence working and trading 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.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her actions resulting of the Utility Regulator's report on the non-independence of the System Operator for Northern Ireland. (AQW 17029/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** The issue of SONI's independence is the subject of consultation by the Utility Regulator.

As this consultation is ongoing it would be inappropriate for me to pre-empt its findings or recommendations.

I am satisfied that the Utility Regulator has the interests of NI consumers as its key focus and look forward to hearing the outcome of the consultation.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister for the Economy when further education students will return to in-person classes.  
(AQW 17031/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** The full return to face-to-face on-site learning at the further education (FE) colleges will be subject to the phases set out in the Executive's 'Pathway out of Restrictions' which was published on 2 March 2021.

The current arrangements are that colleges can remain open to their learners by delivering 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. Learners and staff have been permitted on-site to undertake examinations and assessments in line with relevant government issued industry and workplace restrictions and guidance for occupational settings.

For many learners, online learning will not be sufficient to enable them to achieve their qualifications by the end of the academic year. Students undertaking licence to practice and competency skills-based programmes will need to return on-site for the opportunity to undertake skills training and associated assessment activities if they are to successfully complete their programme and progress to employment or further education or training.

In particular, learners currently studying in 'close contact' subject areas, such as hair and beauty, sports studies, and service elements of hospitality, and where the wider sector is still under occupational operating restrictions, have not yet been able to return to face-to-face on-site education. This is impacting the ability of these learners to gain enough practical experience to allow them to undertake their assessments and subsequently gain employment or move into the next stage of their training.

At the Executive meeting on 15 April it was agreed that those learners who are training in close contact subjects can return to on-site training at FE premises from Friday 23 April 2021 (to coincide with the lifting of restrictions in the close contact services), subject to strict adherence to conditions set out in (i) a specific guidance note for close contact training services, (ii) the principles in the Framework for the Safe Resumption of On-Site Educational Provision and Related Activity which was published in August 2020 and regularly reviewed with up to date advice and guidance from the NI Executive and Public Health Agency, and (iii) site specific risk assessments.

The second phase of the 'Pathway out of Restrictions' will see a partial return to practical face-to-face learning for increased numbers of FE learners, apprentices and Training for Success (TfS) participants. This will enable those learners to undertake skills training and associated assessment activities to enable them to successfully complete their programmes. There will be no change to FE delivery in the third phase, but by the end of phase four increased face-to-face teaching will be permitted for FE learners and apprentices. Finally, by the end of phase five, FE colleges will move to a full return to face-to-face learning.

This staged and gradual approach to the easing of restrictions will be kept under review and will be informed by a range of evidence and data, which will determine the dates at which we can progress.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether her Department has calculated the amount of renewable electricity that would be required to produce sufficient hydrogen to replace natural gas in the supply networks; and (ii) for her assessment of the level of renewable electricity generating capacity that would be required.  
(AQW 17049/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** On the 31st March 2021, my department published the options consultation paper to further inform the development of the Northern Ireland Energy Strategy.

Within the options consultation paper, the example cited in the question was not proposed as a potential option and therefore has not been modelled.

As we progress through the coming months, I look forward to seeing all responses to the consultation and welcome participation in this area to highlight the engagement opportunity it provides.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy to provide details of any Executive Departments or organisations which were paid for internal consultation, in each of the last four years.  
(AQW 17076/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** Details of the organisations which my Department has paid for internal consultancy services in each of the past four years are included in Annex A.

#### Annex A – DfE Internal Consultancy 2017-20

Organisation ("X" indicates that the organisation was paid for services in that year)	2017	2018	2019	2020
Construction and Procurement Delivery formerly Central Procurement Directorate (Department of Finance)	X	X	X	X
Departmental Solicitors' Office (Department of Finance)	X	X	X	X
Strategic Investment Board Limited	X	X	X	X
Business Consultancy Service (Department of Finance)	X	X	X	X
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (Department of Finance)	X	X	X	X

Organisation (“X” indicates that the organisation was paid for services in that year)	2017	2018	2019	2020
Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment			X	
NI Direct (Department of Finance)			X	X
Enterprise Shared Services (Department of Finance)	X	X	X	X
Property Services (Department of Finance)	X	X	X	X

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy to provide details of the total amount of grants given via Invest NI to Caterpillar (NI).

**(AQW 17077/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** From 2003 to date, Caterpillar NI (formerly FG Wilson) has received grant support of £13.33m. These payments were made against offers of support once the company had delivered the terms of the letters of offer and were for job creation, capital investment, Skills, R&D and establishment of an Engineering Centre of Excellence at its operations in Larne, Monkstown and Springvale, Belfast.

Invest NI does not hold details of payments against offers prior to this date.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm (i) whether her Department requested that statements critical of current energy governance in Northern Ireland were to be removed in University of Exeter Report on Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition; and, (ii) if so, the rationale for this request.

**(AQW 17078/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department’s role in any external research, is to help ensure it is factually accurate and supported by evidence. The researchers from the University of Exeter provided my officials with an initial draft of the report for review and comment, which was shared with a range of government stakeholders. Officials provided information to the researchers to seek to ensure the factual accuracy of the report’s contents. This would be viewed as ‘normal practice’.

It is for the authors to use any information provided to them to draw their own conclusions which, naturally, may change as additional evidence is gathered.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of how community energy groups can contribute to lowering the reliance on fossil fuels for energy; and (ii) whether her Department has given any assistance to such groups.

**(AQW 17095/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Consultation on Policy Options for the new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland provides a vision of net zero carbon and affordable energy by placing consumers at the heart of Northern Ireland’s energy future. The Consultation includes a proposal to develop a policy framework for community energy that meets the requirements of the 2019 Electricity (Recast) Directive, whilst also considering additional policy measures that could be included. These include providing access to finance, incentives and capability training to enable communities to generate, use, sell and share their energy.

While direct financial assistance has not been provided to community energy organisations, a small number have developed renewable electricity generating stations which are accredited under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) to confirm that, as part of the Strategic Energy Framework consultation, whether she is aware that the source of the methane gas for the putative gas storage facilities off Islandmagee includes gas extracted in North America using fracking techniques; and (ii) for her assessment of whether it is ethical and appropriate to convert this fossil gas to hydrogen and carbon gases as a way of delivering hydrogen for heating and road fuels.

**(AQW 17138/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:**

- (i) Northern Ireland currently obtains all of its gas supplies via an undersea pipeline from the gas transmission system in Great Britain and, without significant additional infrastructure investment, this would be the expected source of gas for any potential gas storage facility sited in Northern Ireland. Consideration of alternative sources of gas for the proposed Islandmagee project is a matter for the developers.
- (ii) My Department’s current consultation on policy options for the new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland views ‘green’ hydrogen, produced by electrolysis powered by renewable electricity sources such as excess wind, as primary in our future energy profile. The consultation also considers the potential for creating zero carbon ‘blue’ hydrogen to help meet our energy requirements in the future through steam methane reforming of fossil fuels with carbon capture. The fuels utilised in this process might include natural gas or biomethane taken from existing gas networks. It is too early at this stage of the development of the Energy Strategy to comment on issues which have yet to be fully considered and decided upon, but I welcome all responses to the consultation.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether a ban on petroleum licensing will be one of the options presented to the Executive when it considers the consultancy report from Hatch Regeneris.

**(AQW 17146/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department will use all relevant information, including the report from Hatch Regeneris, to consider and evaluate all policy options before presenting an analysis and recommendations to the Executive in due course.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the conclusion from consultants Hatch Regeneris in its report on fracking for the Welsh government that within the UK Government, there is clearly now a supportive policy environment for the development of unconventional oil and gas, setting out to provide a safe, responsible and environmentally sound basis for the recovery of the unconventional reserves of oil and gas within the UK; and (ii) for her assessment of whether that conclusion makes the appointment of Hatch Regeneris to conduct the fracking review for her Department incompatible with the position of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

**(AQW 17147/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:**

- (i) Regeneris Consulting, Cardiff University and AMEC Consulting produced a report into the Socio-economic Impact of Unconventional Gas in Wales in July 2015. The excerpt that the member refers to was an accurate summation of the UK government position at that point in time which was prior to changes in policy position in England and Wales.
- (ii) Hatch Regeneris was appointed to carry out Northern Ireland specific research having fulfilled the criteria set out on e-tenders at time of advertisement of the procurement. This included qualifications and experience, proposed methodology, contract management and price. Hatch has been commissioned by the Department to undertake an assessment of the environmental, social and economic impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and development in Northern Ireland. The report will not make policy recommendations. The report's findings, along with any other relevant information, will inform the Department's development of policy options in line with the policy development process and will be subject to both Executive approval and public consultation.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the total amount of grants given to FG Wilson.

**(AQW 17165/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Given that the information requested is from 1999, which is after the Caterpillar Inc. acquisition, no additional information can be provided regarding grants given to FG Wilson than that provided in response to AQW 17077 17-22 which asked 'the Minister for the Economy to provide details of the total amount of grants given via Invest NI to Caterpillar (NI)'.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update of when students in further education will return to face-to-face teaching, given sixth-form students in schools have already done so.[R]

**(AQW 17193/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** New Energy Strategy

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy, in relation to the New Energy strategy, to detail (i) the specific areas in which the green economy and in particular green energy is likely to create employment; and (ii) what steps she is taking to ensure workers in Northern Ireland will be equipped with the skills required by these employment opportunities.

**(AQW 17195/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Decarbonising energy will provide many opportunities to create wealth through investment and jobs whilst ensuring our environment is sustainable. Last month I launched a consultation on the new Energy Strategy with 'Growing a Green Economy' as one of five principles of the Strategy. This is also a key pillar of my Economic Recovery Action Plan.

- (i) Through these strategic plans, we have the opportunity to develop new clean energy technologies, embrace innovation and support new skills as part of a low carbon workforce. Building on the Economic Recovery Action Plan that I published in February, proposed areas of focus in the Energy Strategy Options Consultation include energy efficiency, renewable energy, and the development and growth of our circular and hydrogen economies.
- (ii) The Energy Strategy Options Consultation identifies skills as a key priority to develop the skills needed for new jobs within the clean energy sector. This includes training and education opportunities through apprenticeships, as well as further and higher education routes. We will also consider measures to re-skill and re-train the workforce impacted by the transition from fossil fuels. The Options Consultation includes a proposal to establish an Energy Skills Forum to shape skills development for our emerging low carbon workforce. I will also soon be bringing forward a consultation on a new Skills Strategy which will outline the strategic priorities for skills development in meeting the needs of the economy.

All of these important policy proposals are discussed in more detail in the Energy Strategy policy options consultation. I would encourage you and your constituents to respond to help inform our net zero energy future.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail how she will ensure energy costs will remain affordable for consumers throughout the drive to decarbonise the local energy sector.

**(AQW 17196/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Our proposed vision for the new Energy Strategy is to deliver a transition to net zero carbon energy systems that has consumers at its centre.

The consultation on Policy Options for a new Energy Strategy proposes a number of policies and measures to deliver fair and affordable energy systems. These include:

- Ensuring that affordability and fairness are primary considerations when assessing the costs, investment and financial support needed to meet net zero carbon energy;
- Enabling all consumers who want to participate in the future energy system and providing adequate protections to all, particularly vulnerable consumers; and
- Adopting a “one stop shop” to make sure all consumers have access to adequate, tailored and easy to understand information and support.

**Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will consider reopening the Small Business Support Grant Scheme and the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme: Parts A and B, for businesses that had not applied in time but are eligible for support.

**(AQW 17240/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Small Business Support Grant Scheme opened on 26 March 2020. The scheme closed to applications on 20 May 2020 and is now fully closed.

The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) Part A opened to applications on 28 October 2020 and Part B opened to applications on 19 November 2020. This scheme has been extended in conjunction with the amended Coronavirus Health Regulations on a number of occasions, with the latest closing date for applications to both Part A and B being extended from 31 March 2021 to 7 April 2021.

These schemes were announced and then widely publicised on a variety of media outlets, including the respective extensions referred to above. Guidance was available online via the NI Business Info website, with dedicated helplines available to deal with enquiries to aid the application process. My Department considers that the schemes have been open to applications for a suitable length of time and has no plans to re-open these schemes.

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.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for the Economy what plans her Department has to provide support to the wedding industry, particularly wedding dress shops that have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**(AQW 17253/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Since March 2020, the NI Executive and the UK Government have introduced an unprecedented number of interventions and packages of financial support to help those who have been affected by the consequences of Covid-19.

The Department for the Economy (DfE) has led in the delivery of business related support, providing approximately £440 million of much needed funds to support local businesses from all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland, with the primary aim of helping these businesses to survive the pandemic, and protect as many local jobs as possible.

The Department has no plans to introduce any new schemes at this time. Rather, the Department's 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.

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 McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy for the rationale for her Department's change in policy from opposing Contracts for Difference for renewable electricity generation to now supporting them in the energy strategy consultation.

**(AQW 17257/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The majority of responses to power questions in the Energy Strategy Call for Evidence indicated that a support scheme will be necessary to encourage renewables investment in Northern Ireland at sufficient levels to meet net zero targets. This is particularly true in relation to new and emerging technology which would be necessary to address the largely intermittent nature of our current technology mix.

As a result, officials are exploring with BEIS the possibility of extending the Contracts for Difference scheme to Northern Ireland. My aim is to design a scheme that supports generation in Northern Ireland while protecting local consumers from being exposed to higher costs across the UK.



As stated in the Energy Strategy Consultation document, Northern Ireland previously consulted on joining the Contracts for Difference scheme while recognising there were a number of issues that would need to be resolved; these issues will form the basis of discussions with BEIS. However I reserve the right to develop alternative options to promote renewable generation.

The Energy Strategy options consultation was published at the end of March and will remain open until 30 June 2021.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether the energy strategy consultation's reference to the use of blue hydrogen supported by carbon capture and storage is compatible with the strategy's statement that Northern Ireland is not an ideal location for carbon capture and storage.

**(AQW 17258/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The energy strategy consultation paper considers a range of options as we work towards net zero carbon energy by 2050 and seeks evidence on these.

The consultation does not outline a specific policy regarding blue hydrogen and we look forward to receiving responses regarding the role this could play.

With regards to carbon capture, whilst the consultation does not propose developing a policy regime to store carbon at onshore sites in Northern Ireland, it does seek to identify opportunities for capturing, utilising and transporting carbon. Again, I look forward to receiving responses to the consultation on the specific opportunities to inform policy in this area.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for an explanation of the meaning of a strategic approach to the location of renewable projects and grid infrastructure as specified in her Department's energy strategy consultation; and (ii) what it would mean in practice in terms of the regional economic balance of NI and the location of renewable energy infrastructure and electricity grid infrastructure.

**(AQW 17259/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The support of local communities will be vitally important in our efforts to meet increased renewable electricity targets to 2030 and beyond. The strategic approach to planning, proposed in the options consultation for a new Energy Strategy, would require close collaboration between all key stakeholders to encourage the development of renewable electricity projects in areas where renewable resource and grid infrastructure can be optimised.

The process already followed by NIE Networks to group a number of generating stations to enable them to share network infrastructure, is a good example of this in practice. The expectation is that such an approach to planning would limit the spatial effect of future projects and the impact on local communities and the environment. Furthermore, focused rather than widespread grid development would minimise the impact on consumer electricity bills.

Developers gravitate to areas that offer the best renewable resource. This is unlikely to change and the strategic approach proposed, therefore, is not expected to have any significant effect on economic balance.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether a direct duty for the Utility Regulator to reduce carbon should be considered.

**(AQW 17282/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Regulation is identified as a delivery priority in the Energy Strategy Options Consultation published at the end of March.

The consultation highlights that although the Utility Regulator has played an important role in supporting energy decarbonisation to date, energy regulation is going through a significant transition to adapt to new energy objectives and the scale of innovation required.

We therefore intend to work with the Utility Regulator to review the adequacy of its legislative remit in the context of the Energy Strategy

I look forward to receiving feedback from the consultation to help inform the future direction for energy policy and regulation in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy when she will answer AQW 13276/17-22.

**(AQW 17284/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** AQW 13276/17-22 was answered on 20/04/2021.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement her Department is having with further and higher education Institutions in relation to preparing for the resumption of increased in-person learning.

**(AQW 17285/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Department has engaged regularly and comprehensively with the Further Education (FE) sector throughout the course of the pandemic.

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. This group includes representatives from the Department for the Economy (DfE), each of the six FE colleges and Trade Unions, Non Statutory Contractors (NSCs) and advisors including the Department's Quality Improvement Advisor and the Education and Training Inspectorate. The Group developed a guidance document for the sector which has been provided to the colleges and NSCs to advise them on the necessary steps that must be taken to ensure health and safety. 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 \(https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/framework-safe-resumption-site-educational-provision-and-related-activity\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/framework-safe-resumption-site-educational-provision-and-related-activity).

The AOG meets on a regular basis to address key issues that have arisen throughout the year including the practical implications of safely returning to on-site delivery, access to IT equipment to work remotely, assessment and qualifications, and payment of free school meals allowances. This approach has ensured that issues have been identified and addressed as quickly as possible.

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.

The Executive's 'Pathway out of Restrictions' which was published on 2 March 2021, has provided the FE sector with the approach that will be taken as we move forward over the next few months, and my officials will continue to engage with the sector as we progress through the stages.

Most recently my officials engaged with the colleges to identify those groups of learners most at risk of not completing this year and to take steps to address this. In particular learners studying in 'close contact' subject areas, such as hair and beauty, sports studies, and service elements of hospitality, were unable to receive any face-to-face on-site education whilst the wider sector was under occupational operating restrictions which impacted the ability of these learners to gain enough practical experience to allow them to undertake their assessments and subsequently gain employment or move into the next stage of their training.

My officials collaborated with the colleges to produce specific guidance outlining the process that could be put in place in FE colleges and Non Statutory Contractors to mitigate against the risk of infection/transmission of COVID19 in these training environments with the aim of allowing learners to return to gain the required training. At the Executive meeting on 15 April it was agreed that those learners who are training in close contact subjects can 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.

The second phase of the 'Pathway out of Restrictions' will see a partial return to practical face-to-face learning for increased numbers of FE learners, apprentices and Training for Success (TfS) participants, and my officials will engage with the college principals as we progress through this and subsequent phases to ensure the best outcomes for learners in a safe environment.

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 Muir** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will consider launching a scheme whereby her Department works with sponsor companies to support trainee HGV drivers through their vocational qualifications, similar to that successfully rolled out by Belfast City Council.

**(AQW 17351/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Department has a wide range of provision available to meet the current and future skills needs of employers. This includes the successful Assured Skills academies, Skills Focus and InnovateUS, delivered through the Further Education colleges. Financial support is also available through Invest NI to meet companies' skills requirements where they meet the necessary criteria.

Neither my Department, nor Invest NI, currently have any plans to cover the cost of mandatory training, such as HGV licensing.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has any plans to require caravan site operators that have received financial assistance to offer reductions to their site tenants who have paid a full annual fee despite caravan sites being closed.

**(AQW 17371/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Whilst I have sympathy for caravan owners who have not received reductions in their caravan site annual fees, it is not for my Department to intervene on this matter.

This is a contractual issue between the caravan owners and the owners / managers of the caravan park on which they are sited.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any plans to bring forward a bespoke support package for the Wedding and Events' Industry.

**(AQW 17384/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Since March 2020, the NI Executive and the UK Government have introduced an unprecedented number of interventions and packages of financial support to help those who have been affected by the consequences of Covid-19.

The Department for the Economy (DfE) has led in the delivery of business related support, providing approximately £440 million of much needed funds to support local businesses from all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland, with the primary aim of helping these businesses to survive the pandemic, and protect as many local jobs as possible.

The Department has no plans to introduce any new schemes at this time. Rather, the Department's focus is on the full and uninterrupted 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.

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.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) to provide an update on the £500 Covid Disruption Payment for students; and (i) when she expects all payments to be completed.

**(AQW 17388/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Covid Disruption Payments were intended to be paid to eligible students by the end of March 2021. The institutions managed the payment process to the students, and have now provided my Department with the following updates.

The number of Queen's University students who are eligible for the Covid Disruption Payment is 17,928. By Wednesday 31 March, the payment had been issued to 17,693 students. Between Thursday 1 April and Friday 16 April, a further 141 Covid Disruption Payments were issued. Queen's University is continuing to engage with a further 94 students who have been advised of their eligibility, but have yet to provide the information required to facilitate the payment to them.

Ulster University made the Covid Disruption Payment to 16,793 students before the end of March 2021. A further 275 students have since received their payments, bringing the current total to 17,068. Another 74 payments are expected to be paid on 26 and 27 April, bringing the total to 17,142. Another 344 students remain outstanding for payment. The delay for students receiving payment after the end of March has been due to students failing to supply the relevant information to facilitate payment.

897 students at St Mary's University College were eligible for a Covid Disruption Payment. 872 students received a payment on or before 31 March. 20 students received a payment in the period 1 April to 9 April. Issues surrounding incorrect bank details resulted in delays in getting the payment to the remaining students, but St Mary's are working to resolve the matter.

All 865 Stranmillis students eligible for the £500 payment were paid by the end of March 2021.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm (i) when students in further education can expect to return to full-time teaching; and (ii) for her assessment of the disadvantage faced by further education students unable to work from home and sixth-form students in schools who also take courses in further education colleges.[R]

**(AQW 17552/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:**

- (i) Further Education (FE) colleges have continued to provide full time teaching throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, albeit mainly via online delivery during periods of additional restrictions. The full return to face-to-face learning at the FE colleges will be subject to the phases set out in the Executive's 'Pathway out of Restrictions' which was published on 2 March 2021. The Pathway has provided the approach that will be taken as we move forward over the next few months and the FE sector must comply with this.

As previously advised in AQW 171933-/17-22, at the Executive meeting on 15 April it was agreed that those learners who are 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 sectors).

The second phase of the 'Pathway out of Restrictions' will see a partial return to practical face-to-face learning for FE learners, apprentices and Training for Success (TfS) participants in FE colleges and non-statutory contractors (NSCs). This will enable those learners to undertake skills training and associated assessment activities to enable them to successfully complete their programme. At its meeting on 22 April, the Executive agreed that a move to phase two could commence once lateral flow testing arrangements are in place, and this is being progressed as a matter of urgency.

There will be no change to FE delivery in the third phase, but by the end of phase four increased face-to-face teaching will be permitted for FE learners and apprentices. The pathway stipulates that a full return to on-site learning will not take place until the end of stage 5, and a date for that will be determined in due course and in line with public health advice. However, this will be kept under review along with medical and scientific advice about Covid-19 transmission rates, and the process will be expedited if circumstances permit.

- (ii) As advised above, those learners who are studying “close contact” subjects and are unable to complete work at home due to the practical nature of the course, are now able to return to on-site provision, in line with the lifting of operating restrictions in the wider sector. This will allow them to undertake the necessary skills training and associated assessment activities to enable them to successfully complete their programme and progress to employment or further education or training.

Ensuring FE students can access online learning from home during the Covid-19 pandemic has been a key priority and digital hardship funding, in terms of the one-off £60 cash payment for mobile data, is only one of the measures my Department has adopted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The digital hardship fund secured the provision of 500 additional iPads/devices to facilitate online learning for students and prior to that, there had been an additional £4.8 million funding provided to further education colleges for IT equipment that allowed continued access from home for both college staff and students.

During periods of additional Covid-19 restrictions, a small number of FE students who do not have reliable broadband have been allowed to utilise college libraries to access internet facilities.

FE colleges play a significant role in supporting local schools in the delivery of vocational qualifications at both Key Stage 4 and post GCSE. 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.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 17283/17-22, (i) for her assessment of the benefits of the Erasmus Programme; and (ii) whether she will explore ways to assist with, and promote, the continued participation in the programme of students at Northern Ireland universities.

**(AQW 17684/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:**

- (i) I fully recognise the wide ranging benefits that individuals and institutions/organisations from Northern Ireland can secure from participation in international mobility programmes, including schemes which the Department administers and/or provides funding for such as Study USA, the International Development Fund, IAESTE (The International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience) and UKIERI (UK-India Education and Research Initiative), as well as the recently launched UK Turing Scheme and the Erasmus+ programme.
- (ii) In terms of the Irish Government’s proposals for Erasmus+ to which your question refers, these proposals are being taken forward by the Irish Government and our local universities. I expect the universities to actively promote all international mobility programmes that their students might best benefit from.

**Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the further £27.3m student hardship fund announced in the Minister of Finance’s recent statement, in particular how students can access the fund.

**(AQW 17745/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** This funding, in the Written Statement by the Finance Minister, is part of a wider financial support package totalling £37.7million for higher education agreed by the Executive, which I announced on the 4th February. This amount includes £10.4million previously allocated.

This includes:

- £22million to fund a one-off discretionary payment of £500 to all students from the UK and EU who are in full time higher education in Northern Ireland, whether that is in a university or further education college setting;
- £8.5million to address student financial hardship, digital poverty and to support student unions with mental health provision;
- £4.1million for the provision of a safe working, learning and research environment; and
- £3.1million to compensate universities for lost income arising from rental pauses and releasing students from accommodation contracts.

Regarding access to the Hardship funding, these are administered by the Universities, University Colleges and the Further Education Colleges and I would strongly encourage any student facing difficulties to contact their institution to discuss what support is available.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions he has had with (i) the Ulster Farmers Union; and (ii) other representative bodies with regard to the impacts of agriculture production on respiratory health.

**(AQW 17749/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) has accepted transfer of this question from DAERA as HSENI lead on issues relating to occupational health.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), along with HSENI have jointly worked with the members of the Farm Safety Partnership (FSP) to develop a strategy to introduce issues of farmers' occupational health including respiratory health into the latest Farm Safety Partnership action plan.

The Partnership is made up of the key representative bodies within Farming in Northern Ireland and includes 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 DAERA and HSENI.

This has resulted in the inclusion of farmers' occupational health (including respiratory health) in the latest FSP Action Plan.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) as it is due to end in March 2022, what plans she has in place to meet the needs of the community and voluntary sector that depend on the European Social Fund for core funding; (ii) to list all those who currently receive support from the European Social Fund and the amount they receive; and (iii) when she expects to make any future funding proposals known to the community and voluntary sector.

**(AQW 17845/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:**

- (i) My Department does not provide core funding for the Voluntary and Community sector. The NI European Social Funding Programme delivers support to participants with particular barriers to employment and the projects that are currently delivering were selected through a competitive process. This funded activity was only ever expected to continue for a time bound period which in this case is until the end of March 2022.
- (ii) This information is already in the public domain at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/66-european-social-fund-call-2-projects-by-constituency-and-council-area>
- (iii) The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) is the replacement for EU structural funds and it is expected that the full details on this Fund will be published by the UK Government later this year. However, it is now clear, that both the SPF and the Community Renewal Fund 1-year pilot Programme are to be administered directly by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). As currently designed, Departments will not have any role or influence in the allocation of the funds.

Currently, organisations can apply directly for support under the CRF. Further information, including the application forms are available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-community-renewal-fund-prospectus>

Work has been undertaken by officials in the Department to secure additional funding to enable us to extend ESF activity beyond the end of March 2022, providing additional time to consider future policy and funding options. I hope to be able to make a formal announcement around this extension very soon.

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister for the Economy what arrangements have been put in place to ensure that all of the post sent to Invest NI offices is opened regularly and actioned.

**(AQW 17848/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** When Invest NI offices closed in March 2020 in line with NI Executive COVID restrictions, a 'Keepsafe' arrangement was put in place with Royal Mail for HQ post. Incoming post is held and then delivered on a pre-arranged date on a weekly basis. It advised its customers that the office was closed and encouraged them to email correspondence where possible.

Once delivered mail is opened by the agency's Facilities Management service provider and the contents scanned and emailed to the addressee. In the case of private or confidential mail the addressee is contacted to request permission to open, or to arrange for collection. In the regional office network one member of staff has been attending the office on a regular basis to open and disseminate the post.

During the last year much of the contact with Invest NI has moved to digital. It has dealt with 40,000 business enquiries through its Business Support Team, and dealt with on average 250 calls a day. It also launched a dedicated helpline in relation to COVID, and used its business information website to disseminate clear information to businesses, with 5.4 million visits and 9 million pages viewed last year.

**Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail to what extent, and what number of, potential investors have engaged with Invest NI since the end of the transition period, as a result of the unique status under the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol.

**(AQW 17887/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Invest NI promotes Northern Ireland as a destination of choice for mobile foreign direct investment, based on a compelling value proposition that combines our key strengths of a talented and loyal workforce, advanced telecoms infrastructure, a pro-business environment, competitive operating costs and proximity to major markets.

Potential investors assess the aforementioned value proposition as an overall package when determining the optimum location for their international operations, rather than any individual factor being considered in isolation when evaluating our attractiveness relative to other competing locations.

Since the end of the transition period, Invest NI has identified over 30 new potential inward investment opportunities which are currently at an early stage of exploration (and are commercially sensitive).

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the comments attributed to Hatch Regeneris in its evidence to a committee meeting of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council on 15 April 2021 that its consultancy review on petroleum licensing includes the baseline scenario of unlimited exploration.

**(AQW 17902/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Hatch Regeneris met with the Regeneration and Community committee of Fermanagh & Omagh District Council on 15 April 2021 as part of their research into the impact of onshore petroleum exploration in Northern Ireland. The research will consider three development scenarios – high, medium and low levels of exploration and development activity. These development scenarios will be set against a baseline scenario. During discussion with FODC, Hatch referred to a “status quo” or “no production” scenario as including a limited amount of exploration activity occurring but not leading through to commercial development. The Department has since clarified this position with Hatch and confirmed its requirement that the baseline scenario should include no exploration or development activity.

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline whether she has any plans to create a new apprenticeship programme that is accessible for all age demographics.

**(AQW 17904/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department’s current ApprenticeshipsNI programme provides funding support for up to 100% of the cost of off-the-job training for 16-24 year olds, and 50% of the costs for those aged 25 and over in priority sectors only. Higher Level Apprenticeships are already available for all who meet the qualifying criteria irrespective of age or sector.

As set out in my Department’s Economic Recovery Action Plan, I am committed to making apprenticeship opportunities at levels 2 and 3 in the ApprenticeshipsNI programme 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, how she will ensure the potential for greater consumer protections will be considered as part of the expected review of the Caravan Act 2011.

**(AQW 17927/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Department for Communities (DfC) has advised that during this year, it intends to conduct a review of the Caravans Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

My Department has responsibility for working with consumers and traders in relation to consumer rights and responsibilities and my officials will welcome the opportunity to effectively contribute to this review, when invited to do so by DfC.

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 14 May 2021

## Written Answers to Questions

### The Executive Office

**Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment on the remarks by the UK International Trade Secretary that the Protocol is unlikely to be operational by 31 December 2020; and have they met with the Trade Secretary since 8 July 2020 to discuss how this concerns the Northern Ireland business community.  
**(AQW 5828/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister):** The UK Government and the EU agreed at the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee meeting on 17 December 2020 decisions on the implementation of the Protocol. Discussions are continuing.

**Miss Woods** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for an update on phase 2 of the Tackling Paramilitarism programme and its funding; and (ii) whether there is any end of year flexibility for phase 1 projects for the 2021/22 financial year.  
**(AQW 14914/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Executive Office has lead responsibility for Action B4 of the Executive's Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime, also known as the Communities in Transition Project.

The first phase of the Programme expired in March 2021 and the Executive has agreed to a further phase, to be delivered over a three year period up until March 2024.

In early March 2021 the cross-departmental Tackling Paramilitarism Programme Board met and agreed to funding allocations for a series of proposals in the next phase. The Communities in Transition Project will be a significant part of the community-facing element in the next three years.

With regard to end year flexibility for Phase 1, TEO's Communities in Transition Project Team has considered and approved a number of interventions to be extended until 30 June 2021 to ensure there is no gap in delivery before new projects are commissioned.

**Ms Sugden** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for their assessment of the current timetable for children returning to school; (ii) for their assessment of schools fully reopening as part of a broader social and economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic; and (iii) what conversations they have had with the Minister of Health regarding this issue and the wider issue of the health-led reopening of schools and business.  
**(AQW 15225/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** As of 12 April all primary and post primary pupils returned to face to face teaching.

The return of pupils in a safe manner to full-time face-to-face learning was a key priority for the Executive.

The Minister for Education published a statement on 1 April on the return of all pupils to school which is available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/all-pupils-return-school-after-easter-break>

**Mr Beattie** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the planning assumptions that has led to the belief that there may be as many as 30,000 applications to the Troubles-related Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme.; and (ii) the assumptions sent to the Government Actuary's Department that has led the lifetime cost being estimated from around £600 million to £1.2 billion.  
**(AQW 15620/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Officials carried out extensive scoping work to determine potential numbers of successful applications to the Scheme and engaged Government Actuary's Department to provide detailed modelling based

on those estimates. This has been a challenging task because there is no definitive information on numbers who may qualify, nor on the degree or permanence of their disability.

The figures provided by TEO to GAD for the purposes of modelling potential costs were based on an estimate of successful applications ranging from 9,300 as a conservative estimate to 17,200 as an upper estimate with 11,200 as a central estimate. However there will also be applications submitted that may not meet the eligibility requirements; the quantum of those is unknown and they may have a significant impact.

**Mr Carroll** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any conversations they have had with the British Government about its new office in Belfast.

**(AQW 16271/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** There has been no engagement with the First Minister and deputy First Minister on this issue in their roles as Executive Office Ministers.

**Mr Muir** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether outdoor socially distanced classes with a personal trainer will be permitted from 12 April 2021.

**(AQW 16574/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Under current regulations up to 15 people (including coaches) can participate in structured outdoor sports training, through clubs or individuals affiliated to recognised sports Governing Bodies or representative organisations for sport or physical activity.

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 outline where (i) outdoor bowls; and (ii) road bowls sit in their Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions plan.

**(AQW 16597/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Under current regulations, up to 10 people (including children of all ages) from a maximum of two households can take part in outdoor exercise or sports activities, and up to 15 people (including coaches) can take part in structured outdoor sports training, through clubs or individuals affiliated to recognised sports governing bodies or representative organisations for sport and physical activity.

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 Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the lower North Belfast community will be included in any extension of the Communities in Transition Project.

**(AQO 1968/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Executive has agreed to a further phase of the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme, to be delivered up until March 2024.

A contribution of £10 million has been made available to support the Communities in Transition Project over 3 years during the period April 2021 to March 2024.

The Communities in Transition Project will continue to support preventative work within communities that will build their resilience to paramilitary and criminal elements. Contrary to recent media reports, this funding is not designed to support paramilitary organisations becoming community groups but is focused on narrowing the ground within communities that Paramilitarism can use to exert control and influence.

Over the past number of months our officials have been engaging widely with elected representatives, statutory bodies and the community and voluntary sector across the 8 areas of focus to inform draft proposals for the next Phase of delivery.

We all know that paramilitaries and organised crime gangs don't limit their activities by area boundaries, and the issues that allow paramilitarism to persist are not contained by lines on a map. Engagement across the eight areas of focus has evidenced this and we have received a number of requests to extend and expand Communities in Transition activities to a range of locations, including lower North Belfast.

Our priority as we move into phase 2 is to embed and build on the progress that was made across the eight areas during phase 1. We are currently considering the extent to which the current funding contribution of £10 million can provide some support in areas of influence, such as lower North Belfast, where they have a significant impact on the current core areas of focus.

**Ms Bunting** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what feedback has been received from stakeholder groups on the implementation of the Communities in Transition Project.

**(AQO 1971/17-22)**



**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Communities in Transition team have engaged with a wide range of stakeholders throughout the first Phase of the project including delivery partners, local elected representatives at all levels, statutory bodies and representatives from the community and voluntary sector.

In addition to this engagement a Mid-Term Review of the project has also been developed and has been informed through interviews and focus groups with interested parties and stakeholders.

Those who contributed to the review gave credit to a large amount of positive work and emerging aspects of good practice, and highlighted their support for the continuation of CIT beyond this period of funding noting that lasting change is only achieved through a sustained focus.

Positive feedback from participants stated that projects being developed in association with CIT are beginning to have a significant positive influence on their surrounding community.

The review also includes a number of recommendations which will be considered in the context of Phase 2 planning.

Over the coming weeks, in advance of procurement of the next phase of the project, officials have scheduled a number of briefings with Political Parties, PSNI and local councils.

Premarket engagement sessions have also been scheduled inviting those with an interest in CIT's work to contribute their views to the Phase 2 plans in each of the CIT areas. The feedback from these premarket engagement sessions will be considered, and where appropriate included in the plans for phase 2 projects.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether physically separated couples can be reunited when this requires international travel; (ii) to provide the rationale and data to support this guidance; (iii) to detail when any restrictions in this regard will be reviewed; and (iv) to detail any legislation that supports these restrictions.

**(AQW 18381/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** It is important that everyone, including long distance couples, continues to follow the requirements outlined in the Coronavirus Regulations, which state that only essential travel should take place. To stop the spread of potentially harmful variants here, the Executive agreed on 25 March to the introduction of managed isolation in hotel accommodation on return from Red List countries for a period of 10 days and a requirement to test on days 2 and 8 of the isolation period.

Anyone intending to travel directly, or via another country, to here from outside the Common Travel Area, including British and Irish nationals returning home, from a non-Red List country is required to self-isolate at home and take a test on days 2 and 8 of the isolation period.

Guidance is available on NI Direct: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-travelling-red-list-country>

The Executive will keep our travel arrangements and advice under review as we move through the Pathway and throughout our recovery phase. The following rules for entering or returning to Northern Ireland (NI) are in place: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2021/99/contents/made>

**Mrs Barton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their engagement at the EU/UK Joint Committee regarding the requirements for domestic pets travelling between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

**(AQO 1787/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** We have ensured that the issues associated with the operability of the Protocol, including the requirements for domestic pets travelling from GB, have been discussed within the Joint Committee structures.

Issues relating to pet travel are also being raised in the technical level discussions that feed into the Joint Committee. This issue was also discussed at the Specialised Committee on 23 February, which had representation from the Executive at official level.

In addition to using the Joint Committee structures, DAERA is participating in a working group, with the Irish Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Defra to explore possible bi-lateral arrangements.

**Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment on the impact of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

**(AQO 1524/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Joint Committee is responsible for the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, while DAERA has responsibility for fulfilling the Executive's obligations in relation to Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks. We have attended and will continue to attend the meetings of the Joint Committee to ensure that our position on the implementation of the Protocol is communicated to the EU. Departmental officials attended meetings of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Specialised Committee.

We wrote to European Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič on 5 November 2020 on the implications of the Withdrawal Agreement stressing that application of the Protocol should impact as little as possible on the everyday life of communities in Northern Ireland.

We are continuing to work to address the impacts of the end of the transition period as they arise, and to engage with the UK Government, the Irish Government and industry in order to find solutions.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the recruitment of a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors.

**(AQO 1972/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** We are currently considering the comprehensive documentation required to begin the recruitment process for a new Commissioner for Victims and Survivors.

In the meantime, we recognise that continuity is important for victims and survivors, and so we have ensured that interim arrangements are in place within the Commission, to allow the provision of continued support for victims and survivors.

The Victims and Survivors Service will also continue to deliver its services to victims and survivors, which are tailored to individual needs.

**Ms Hunter** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any feedback their Department has received from the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse on the interactions between victims and the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board.

**(AQO 1969/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** We met the Commissioner, Fiona Ryan, on 24 March 2021.

She updated us on her engagement with victims and survivors and the work she is taking forward to ensure that their needs are understood and met by service providers. It was encouraging to note feedback on the dedicated HIA Support Service launched in December.

The Redress Board was launched at the height of the pandemic on 31 March 2020 and, despite those restrictions, 629 applications have been considered by a panel, with determinations to a value of £13.4 million. This has been a significant achievement in difficult operating circumstances.

However, the Commissioner made the point that the process is a legal one, with clients expected to liaise with solicitors, and that many victims and survivors have limited access to their solicitor for various reasons, and lack of communication fuels anxiety. She noted a number of concerns raised by victims and survivors.

Since our meeting, the President of the Redress Board, Mr Justice Huddleston, has met four of the victims' and survivors' groups, on 31 March.

Officials will now work with the Commissioner and the Board to look at all aspects of the applicant journey, to identify what is working well; where there is scope for improvement; and where further support can be provided. This will of course involve input from victims' and survivors' representatives.

## Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the impact on the environment and local wildlife from (i) Italian bees; and (ii) the small hive beetle.

**(AQW 16988/17-22)**

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** DAERA is aware of recent reports suggesting that the introduction of large numbers of bees may have a negative impact on wildlife and the environment.

Unfortunately under the Withdrawal Agreement and Northern Ireland Protocol, only certain control measures may be applied when moving bees between countries within the European Union (EU) and into Northern Ireland, and the Department has no legal basis to prevent these importations at present.

It is recognised that Small Hive Beetle (SHB) does have the potential to cause significant disruption in Northern Ireland if it were to become established here, and its impact on naïve bee populations can be devastating. In the EU however, it has only been identified in Italy where it has become established in the province of Calabria. An outbreak in Sicily caused by illegal bee movement was detected early and no further spread occurred.

EU legislation has now imposed strict controls on the export of bees from Calabria in order to ensure that SHB does not spread. This has effectively prevented the spread of SHB and my officials do not therefore consider that there is a significant risk of it arriving here with Italian imports. It would not therefore be appropriate to impose additional constraints on the movement of bees from Italy.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) have considered what powers might be available to prohibit the movement of Buckfast Honeybees from Italy to Northern Ireland. NIEA have concluded that, as bees are not a protected species under the terms of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, and because the Buckfast strains are already resident here, there are no legal grounds to prohibit the importation or release of Buckfast bees on this basis either.

The importation of honeybees into Northern Ireland has been ongoing for many years and beekeepers currently choose without restriction what varieties, races or subspecies of bees to keep. The genetic make-up of the Northern Irish honeybee population is poorly known but it almost certainly comprises a mixed population of honeybees from many sources, including those from continental Europe. The finding from 2018 of a pure population of *Apis mellifera mellifera* in Galway is therefore encouraging and along with subsequent findings of wild *A. m. mellifera* in Ireland shows populations can maintain genetic integrity through isolation and despite hybridisation pressure.

In support of this, my Department is also currently updating its Strategy for the Sustainability of the Honey Bee. This document recommends that beekeepers minimise imports and use bees of local provenance, not least as they are considered more suited to our climate and resistant to local pests and diseases. We are also working with the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan and Department staff sit on the Steering Group developing its forthcoming Honeybee Strategy component.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether (i) his Department; or (ii) the Forest Service have ownership of any trees within the Portavoe Reservoir site.

**(AQW 17350/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department own trees on the land at the Portavoe Reservoir site, which was sold by NI Water in 2020. Forest Service has managed these trees under a management agreement with NI Water (formerly DOE) since 1978.

Following the sale of the land by NI Water to private landowners, the ownership and management of the trees continues as per the agreement with the former landowner NI Water, which is covenanted in the Contracts for Sale relating to the land transfer.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether (i) he has any concerns around the importation of honey bees to Northern Ireland; and (ii) he can provide information confirming the negative impact imported honey bees have on the indigenous black bee.

**(AQW 17505/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** DAERA officials are aware of the concerns that have been expressed surrounding the potential to introduce exotic bee diseases from Italy 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 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 intends to inspect such high-risk consignments when they arrive in Northern Ireland.

Prior to EU exit, it was possible for packages of bees to be traded between the EU and UK. Due to the legislative changes associated with EU exit, restrictions now apply to movements between GB and EU in both directions. These are not however due to any change in health status.

In the EU the Small Hive Beetle (SHB) has only been identified in the Calabria region of Italy. EU legislation has imposed strict controls on the export of bees from Calabria in order to ensure that SHB does not spread. This has effectively prevented the spread of SHB, and my officials do not therefore consider that there is a significant risk of it arriving here with Italian imports. It would not therefore be appropriate to impose additional constraints on the movement of bees from Italy.

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**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQW 16951/17-22, whether he knew that the posts were being advertised.

**(AQW 17711/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I can advise that I was not aware that posts were being advertised.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department will provide funding for the Sion Mills masterplan.

**(AQW 17790/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** DAERA allocated £6.2m to the Local Action Group (LAG) in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, from the NI Rural Development 'LEADER' Programme 2014-2020, to support business, services and village project activity that will continue until 2022. The LAG, working with Derry City and Strabane District Council, have invested £196k of this funding in the provision of an all ability play area that was identified as a need within the Sion Mills master plan.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the future of funding for farmers after 2022.

**(AQW 17791/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I understand that the UK leaving the EU will have created some uncertainty regarding agricultural funding. The EU worked on a seven year funding cycle, known as the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which set out the maximum amount of spend in the EU budget each year and fixed an overall annual ceiling on payments.

The 2019 Conservative Manifesto Commitment was to guarantee the current annual budget to farmers in every year of the next Parliament. It should be noted, however, that one Parliament cannot bind another.

The Spending Review Outcome, announced on 25 November 2020 confirmed that DAERA will receive £315.6 m to support farmers, land managers and the rural economy for 2021/2022.

Funding issues are regularly discussed at Ministerial level at the Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (IMG EFRA) and I take every opportunity to ensure that UK Government has a full understanding of Northern Ireland's priorities and challenges.

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what arrangements have been put in place to ensure that all of the post sent to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is opened regularly and actioned.

**(AQW 17847/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** In line with COVID-19 regulations, NIEA buildings are restricted to essential staff only. Each business area has nominated essential staff who are responsible for handling post. Staff availability can however be limited by the on-going pandemic. NIEA staff endeavour to respond to all correspondence within our Customer Standards timelines.

I apologise if this has not consistently been the case.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of people employed by the meat and dairy industry, broken down by job type.

**(AQW 17936/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** In 2019, the Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES) estimated that there were 15,477 employee jobs in those sectors aligned to the meat and dairy industry. A profile of these employee jobs, by gender and working pattern, is detailed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Employee jobs in meat and dairy industry**

Sector	Male			Female			Total
	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	
Processing and preserving of meat	3,111	66	3,177	768	33	801	3,978
Processing and preserving of poultry meat	2,547	115	2,662	1,649	*	*	*
Production of meat and poultry meat products	920	65	986	375	*	*	*
Liquid milk and cream production	411	6	417	46	12	58	475
Butter and cheese production	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Manufacture of other milk products	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Manufacture of ice cream	48	5	53	35	5	40	93
Wholesale of live animals	17	94	111	7	38	45	156
Wholesale of meat and meat products	790	46	836	379	59	438	1,274

Sector	Male			Female			Total
	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	
Wholesale of dairy products, eggs and edible oils and fats	430	25	455	254	32	286	741
Retail sale of meat and meat products in specialised stores	897	241	1,138	238	327	565	1,703
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,956</b>	<b>684</b>	<b>10,701</b>	<b>3,911</b>	<b>865</b>	<b>4,756</b>	<b>15,477</b>

\* Data have been suppressed for disclosure purposes

In 2017, DAERA's Migrant Labour and Trade Enquiry estimated that there were 24,328 employees employed in the food and drinks processing sector. A profile of the occupation of all employees in this sector is detailed in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Occupation profile of food and drinks processing sector**

Occupation	% of all employees
Managers, Directors and senior officials	6.2%
Administrative and secretarial occupations	9.6%
Elementary occupations (Unskilled, miscellaneous or other occupations)	5.1%
Process, plant and machine operatives	66.5%
Sales and customer service occupations	4.3%
Caring, Leisure and other service occupations	0.5%
Skilled trades occupations	4.1%
Associate professional and technical occupations	3.1%
Professional occupations	0.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline what role his Department has in relation to the maintenance of the city walls in Londonderry.

**(AQW 17950/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The city walls of Derry were constructed between 1613 and 1618 by The Honourable the Irish Society and the walls are still owned by them. Since 1955, the walls have been designated a State Care Monument and they are under the guardianship of my Department. As such, my Department is responsible for conserving and maintaining the historic fabric of the walls. In 2009, my Department set up the multi-agency Derry Walls Management Group to facilitate a partnership approach to management of the Walls. The Group is responsible for strategic decision making regarding the walls and it works to deliver the Derry Walls Conservation Plan and the Derry Walls Management Plan.

The Management Group includes representatives from the Department for Communities, The Honourable the Irish Society, Derry City and Strabane District Council, the City Centre Initiative, Visit Derry, Tourism NI and The Friends of the Derry Walls.

Since 2019, my Department has also funded a Walls Manager within the City Centre Initiative who is responsible locally for the day to day management of the walls.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department will carry out an extensive assessment on the full impact of the devastating Mournes wildfires on this important protected habitat for plants and animals.

**(AQW 17964/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Yes my officials will carry out an assessment of the environmental damage caused by this major wildfire to the protected habitat of the Mournes.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will launch a public inquiry into the cause of the devastating wildfires which destroyed protected habitats.

**(AQW 17965/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I will not be launching a public inquiry into the cause of the recent wildfire in the Mournes.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in development of an Outdoor Recreation Strategy, will he place an emphasis on the public to enjoy outdoor spaces responsibly.

**(AQW 17966/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I am on record regarding the importance that is placed on each one of us to treat the outdoors with respect whether in relation to the natural environment or the land upon which we walk. My Department will continue to provide advice and guidance.

My Department chairs the cross-government Strategic Outdoor Recreation Group to oversee implementation of The Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland. This includes Communication, Marketing and Promotion to participants and visitors of where they can visit and how to behave responsibly.

With the growth of outdoor recreation during Covid 19 my Department has encouraged greater awareness of these messages including through the MyNI Get Into Nature campaign and the current Right Side of Outside Campaign.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has considered launching a public inquiry into outbreaks of wildfires.

**(AQW 18011/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I will not be launching a public inquiry into outbreaks of wildfires.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail any active and proposed plans to encourage and support commercial fisherman to use more environmentally friendly trawling techniques and reduce by-catch.

**(AQW 18026/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Northern Ireland was the first part of the UK to develop and adopt highly selective fishing gear to avoid unwanted by-catches of cod, haddock and whiting in the Nephrops (prawns) fishery, the main fishery in the Irish Sea for the local industry. This was a joint approach between DAERA, Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and the local fishing industry, which was initiated in 2013. This joint approach continues through the Northern Ireland Gear Trials Programme. DAERA currently provides financial support for undertaking gear trials and the testing of industry identified gear technologies, focused on achieving further reductions in unwanted by-catch.

Research into highly selective fishing gear and more environmentally friendly fishing methods will continue to be supported by the Department. Current funding is in place until December 2022.

**Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department carried out a financial assessment of herd keepers of the implementation of EU Reg No. 2016/429, the Animal Health Law.

**(AQW 18029/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The EU Animal Health Law (AHL) is a consolidating instrument and for the most part it preserves the status quo. It does, however, make some changes which will require some modifications to domestic legislation and operational practices. This will include a number of areas where herd keepers will be impacted. My officials are continuing to analyse the AHL and supporting tertiary legislation, some of which has yet to be published by the EU Commission, to ascertain its full impact. I expect this scoping work to be completed in the coming months.

Where domestic legislative or operational changes are required in order to support the implementation of the AHL in Northern Ireland the Department will proceed with the relevant financial impact assessments where appropriate to quantify the likely impact of any proposed legislative and/or operational amendments.

The EU Commission has confirmed it will take a 'flexible and pragmatic approach' towards Member States where full implementation of the legislation by the date of application 21 April 2021 has not been possible due to EU Exit and Covid-19 response. This approach by the Commission will facilitate the additional time required by many jurisdictions impacted by the AHL to fully analyse its detail and progress facilitation of its implementation.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the current target for ensuring that Areas of Special Scientific Interest are in, or approaching, a favourable condition.

**(AQW 18055/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** There is no current target within my Department for ensuring that ASSIs are in, or approaching, a favourable condition. We report ASSI condition annually through the Northern Ireland Environmental Statistics Report.

My Department is continuing to work with landowners and other stakeholders to ensure that sympathetic management of ASSIs is in place. A range of delivery mechanisms are in place to achieve this objective. These include agri-environment schemes (EFS), EU Interreg Va Programme, the management of the DAERA estate and grant-aid support from DAERA, in addition to direct funding by NIEA through the Management of Sensitive Sites scheme (MOSS).

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what inter-agency approach is being taken to educate the public on the causes of wildfires and prevent similar events, such as the devastating Mourne wildfires, from re-occurring.

**(AQW 18056/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I refer the Honourable Member to my response for AQW 17967/17-22 which confirmed the clear actions already taken by my Department and other partners and those proposed for the future.

As I said in my statement to the Assembly on 26 April 2021 'partnership working is not an option but a requirement'. It was clearly demonstrated during the recent major incident in the Mourne Mountains that an inter-agency approach was the key to success. I am grateful to our wide range of partners for the dedication and professionalism they showed and the assistance they provided.

My Department will continue to inform the public about the dangers of wildfires and to work with other interested parties to eradicate this problem.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether there is a difference in the operating costs of a deposit return scheme depending on whether there is a (i) variable rate deposit; or (ii) flat rate deposit.

**(AQW 18057/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I launched a public consultation on 24 March 2021 which will close on 4th June 2021 on a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for drinks containers, which seeks further views on optimal deposit level.

The set-up and operational costs of a DRS for drinks containers will be met through producer fees paid by producers of in-scope drinks containers and material revenue from recycling the returned drinks containers. The deposit level should not impact the operational cost of the scheme because it is refundable and essentially should be cost neutral.

The link to the consultation document can be found on the following link. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/introducing-deposit-return-scheme-england-wales-and-northern-ireland>

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment his Department has made of whether a variable rate deposit in the upcoming deposit return scheme would lead to increasing return rates.

**(AQW 18058/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Along with my counterparts in England and Wales I launched a public consultation on 24 March 2021 which will close on 4th June 2021 on a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for drinks containers. Chapter four of the consultation deals with deposit level. Consumer research suggests that the deposit level needs to be high enough to motivate use without influencing affordability.

As detailed within chapter six of the DRS impact assessment, experience from international schemes indicates a broadly positive, though variable, relationship between the deposit charged and the return rate achieved. Responses to previous consultations suggest a majority of consumers favour a flat rate but complications arise when considering, for example, multipacks.

To take account of different considerations the consultation proposes that minimum and, possibly, maximum deposit rates could be set within secondary legislation, which will describe the methodology to be used for altering the deposit level. This would give a scheme administrator the flexibility to meet statutory collection targets. Further views on this aspect of the scheme are being sought in the current live consultation.

The link to the consultation document can be found on the following link. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/introducing-deposit-return-scheme-england-wales-and-northern-ireland>

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail what responsibility or remit his Department has in relation to Portavoe Beach, Donaghadee.

**(AQW 18059/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** DAERA is responsible for monitoring water quality at 26 identified bathing waters round the coast of Northern Ireland. However Portavoe Beach, near Donaghadee, is not an identified site.

To qualify as an identified bathing water, a proposed site must meet legally defined criteria on usage, safety, site management and provision of information. This includes the appointment of a bathing water operator such as a local council to provide the site management and information requirements. If it is confirmed that a nominated site meets the criteria, a public consultation is undertaken with a view to formally identifying as a bathing water.

Identified bathing waters are monitored to assess water quality throughout the bathing season which runs from 01 June to 15 September, with compliance data published annually.

I am aware of the increased interest in bathing at both inland and coastal waters, including Portavoe Beach, during the COVID-19 pandemic. My Department will begin the preparatory work this year for a formal review of bathing waters in 2022, consulting with the public and statutory bodies as to the suitability of current arrangements.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the current price to farmers of (i) animal feed; (ii) silage; and (iii) fuel for agricultural machinery.

**(AQW 18072/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** On an ongoing basis, my Departmental officials collate data from various sources to assess the prices of agricultural inputs. Based on these, my assessment of the current prices to farmers are as follows:

(i) **Animal feed**

My Department has established a statistical series on feed prices. From this, it can be seen that annual average feed prices increased by £5 per tonne between 2019 and 2020 i.e. a price increase of 1.8%. While the statistical series doesn't extend beyond 2020, media reports indicate that feed price increases have already occurred in 2021. These reports suggest that it is a range of global factors that have driven these increases in 2021.

(ii) **Silage**

My Department publishes a regular statistical report that contains the average market prices for silage. The latest prices shown within this report are £15.20 per bale for March 2021, which is 4.8% higher than March 2020. Since January 2020, price trends for silage have been relatively stable with monthly averages ranging between £14 and £18 per bale. The latest price of £15.20 per bale for March 2021 is within this range.

(iii) **Fuel for agricultural machinery**

My Department has established a statistical series on red diesel prices. The latest prices shown within this series are 56.11 pence per litre for March 2021, which is 4.7% higher than March 2020. During 2020, there was a fall in red diesel prices and they remained at levels that were relatively low when compared to those of past years. However, red diesel prices have been increasing again during 2021 and are now back to levels that are in line with those prior to March 2020.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on progress in developing post-Brexit farm support schemes.

**(AQW 18087/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Work is underway to develop an agricultural support framework portfolio better suited to local needs and one that will provide for and secure long term sustainability within the industry.

In developing a future support framework, priority consideration is being given to address the four desired outcomes identified with key food, farming and environmental stakeholders, namely; increased productivity, environmental sustainability, improved resilience and a competitive supply chain.

I am determined to work with our farmers, land managers and environmental stakeholders, to co-design a new approach that is focused on delivering these outcomes.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of the efficacy of methane-lowering animal feed supplements; and (ii) to detail any steps he has taken to encourage farmers to use such supplements to contribute to lowering the industry's greenhouse gas emissions.

**(AQW 18095/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** There are no methane-lowering feed supplements on the market in the UK at present. However, in some parts of the world there are a range of supplements which are recently released or under development, with some more advanced than others. Research findings indicate that the supplements offer a range of potential to reduce enteric methane emissions from ~10% up to over 80%.

The feed additive 3-Nitrooxypropanol (3-NOP) for ruminants (cattle, sheep, goats, deer, and other ruminants) has been researched and developed over 10 years by the Dutch company Royal DSM. Results indicate that using a quarter teaspoon daily in a cow's diet reduced enteric methane emission by approximately 30%. DSM has filed for commercial registration of 3-NOP under the trade name Bovaer® and currently await EU approval.

A livestock feed additive made from the seaweed *Asparagopsis* sp. has been shown to reduce methane emissions in beef and dairy cattle by more than 80% in research trials in Australia and the USA. Further research is underway and a company has been formed to scale up and commercialise a product made from *Asparagopsis* sp.

Other products of note include the garlic and citric acid based supplement Mootral™ being developed by a Swiss company, that has been shown to reduce enteric methane emissions by between 23% and 30% in on farm research and Agolin® Ruminant, a plant-based feed additive produced by another Swiss company that is claimed to reduce methane emissions from cattle by between 10% and 20%.

Locally, AFBI Hillsborough is currently undertaking a range of projects which aim to develop mitigation strategies for lower enteric methane emissions in dairy, beef cattle and sheep production, though dietary inclusions of seaweed additives, oil, white/red clover, multispecies forage, etc.

AFBI is also investing in infrastructure (using DAERA funding) that will improve their capacity to develop effective methane lowering strategies for adoption on NI cattle/sheep farms. This will enable research, in collaboration with Queens University



Belfast, which will identify potential methane-reducing candidates and trial successful products through a forthcoming ruminant emissions research facility. Uptake on Farm will then be encouraged by CAFRE and through working with the local feed industry, using the confidence from the scientific studies conducted in AFBI and QUB.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment his Department has made of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland each adopting different deposit return schemes.  
(AQW 18120/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** I, along with my counterparts in England and Wales, other UK jurisdictions issued a second consultation on a Deposit/Return Scheme on 24 March 2021. This proposes a scheme which will ensure consistency for major UK suppliers and retailers. This is consistent with the UK-wide approach we have taken for many years on packaging. Implementation of the Deposit Return Scheme is expected in 2024. The Republic of Ireland DRS is due to be implemented in 2022.

My department officials correspond regularly with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland (Department of Environment Climate and Communications DECC) and all-Ireland business representatives to discuss the two schemes to ensure that the impact of any differences are minimised.

The consultation document can be found on the following link which will close on 4th June 2021. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/introducing-deposit-return-scheme-england-wales-and-northern-ireland>.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment his Department has made of a single deposit return scheme operating across the island of Ireland.  
(AQW 18121/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** This question was addressed in the Assembly in answer to AQO 1541/17-22 on 8 February 2021.

My officials have been developing options for a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for drinks containers, alongside England and Wales to ensure consistency for major UK suppliers and retailers. This is consistent with the UK-wide approach we have taken for many years on packaging.

Waste collection in the Republic of Ireland is operated by private firms rather than local councils so any DRS may follow a similar model which may not be suitable for NI. The Republic's scheme also has a different implementation timeline with a launch proposed for late 2022. The UK scheme is proposed to be introduced in NI, England and Wales in 2024.

My officials correspond regularly with their counterparts in the Department for Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) and all-Ireland industry representatives to discuss the schemes and ensure that the operation of the two system don't have any unintended negative consequences.

Further detail on the proposed DRS can be found on the following link. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/introducing-deposit-return-scheme-england-wales-and-northern-ireland>.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his Department's work to implement the recommendations of the Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy report.  
(AQW 18122/17-22)

**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. Officials will continue to work on the actions to implement key recommendations of the SALMS report, including those that will help inform the development and implementation of future agri support schemes.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his Department's work to implement the recommendations of the Making Ammonia Visible report.

**(AQW 18123/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** In May 2018, DAERA published its initial position on the recommendations of the Expert Working Group in "Making Ammonia Visible." This document is available on the DAERA website at the link below;

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/DAERA%20Response%20to%20EWG%20Ammonia%20Annex%20May%202018.pdf>

Since then, the DAERA commissioned scientific research programme on ammonia, as recommended in "Making Ammonia Visible", has delivered a wide range of outputs, including inclusion of more Northern Ireland specific data in the ammonia inventory, analysis on the potential for ammonia reduction in Northern Ireland and how this can be achieved most cost-effectively, case studies on ammonia reduction at individual farm level and increased ammonia monitoring at regional, farm and habitat level in Northern Ireland. The emerging conclusions from this research programme were communicated publicly via webinars in September 2020. Recordings of these webinars are available on the DAERA website at the link below;

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/ammonia-emissions-northern-ireland>

Addressing the recommendations in "Making Ammonia Visible" will form an important aspect of the forthcoming draft ammonia strategy. This strategy will include proposals for an ambitious ammonia reduction programme, restoration and management of our most valuable habitats and a revised Operational Protocol for the assessment of impacts from atmospheric nitrogen pollution.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQW 17298/17-22, to detail (i) the more than 60 water pollution incidents occurring annually in the Foyle constituency; (ii) the reasons for the incidents; and whether the causes of each incident has now been permanently resolved.

**(AQW 18136/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** From the data previously submitted in the AQW 17298/17-22 there were 62 reports of water pollution to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) in 2018, of which 24 had pollution confirmed, 61 reports in 2019 of which 23 were confirmed and 66 reports in 2020, of which 23 were confirmed as causing pollution. Of those 189 reports, each was physically visited by NIEA staff. Details on source, severity and outcomes are listed below in tables 1 to 4 below.

It is not possible to state that any particular incident will not be repeated at any particular location. Whilst the staff in my Department strive to prevent, educate and, where necessary, enforce in relation to water pollution issues, they cannot prevent future pollution once an investigation has been closed.

**Table 1: Source and severity of water pollution incidents in 2018**

Source of pollution	Severity			
	Low	Medium	High	Total
NIW Ltd	1	0	0	1
Domestic	1	0	0	1
Farm	0	3	0	3
Transport	0	0	0	0
Industry	10	0	0	10
Other	9	0	0	9
Total Confirmed	21	3	0	24
No Pollution Found	-	-	-	38
<b>Total</b>		-	-	<b>62</b>

**Table 2: Source and severity of water pollution incidents in 2019**

Source of pollution	Severity			
	Low	Medium	High	Total
NIW Ltd	2	1	0	3
Domestic	3	0	0	3
Farm	4	0	1	5
Transport	0	0	0	0
Industry	3	3	0	6
Other	5	1	0	6
Total Confirmed	17	5	1	23
No Pollution Found	-	-	-	38
<b>Total</b>	-	-	-	<b>61</b>

**Table 3: Source and severity of water pollution incidents in 2020**

Source of pollution	Severity			
	Low	Medium	High	Total
NIW Ltd	2	1	0	3
Domestic	0	0	0	0
Farm	2	1	1	4
Transport	0	0	0	0
Industry	7	0	1	8
Other	8	0	0	8
Total Confirmed	19	2	2	23
No Pollution Found	-	-	-	43
<b>Total</b>	-	-	-	<b>66</b>

**Table 4: Breakdown of outcomes for each year of the confirmed polluting incidents**

Outcome	2018	2019	2020
Enforcement – Water (NI) Order 1999	1	2	3
Enforcement – Nutrient Action Programme Regulations (NI) 2019	1	0	1
No polluter identified	15	9	9
Low Severity – Resolved NIEA pollution team	6	7	7
Low Severity – Resolved or investigation with professional partners	1	5	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>23</b>

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to part of the sale agreement allowing departmentally-issued angling permit holders to fish at Portavoe Reservoir, whether those permit holders can legally access the site.

**(AQW 18142/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department continues to manage the fishing rights to Portavoe Reservoir until the current lease ends in December 2024.

However, my Department does not own the land surrounding Portavoe reservoir, which is in private ownership. Without the owner's permission or agreement DAERA permit holders cannot legally access the reservoir.

Discussions have taken place between my officials and the new owners, and the new owners have confirmed that they wish the site to remain private and not open to the public.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail any plans he has to create countryside management schemes, such as those for the planting of hedgerows on farmland, with a view to offsetting carbon emissions. (AQW 18172/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** My officials are working with farmers and land managers, agricultural industry representatives and environmental stakeholders to co-design a future agri-environment scheme. The scheme will help farmers to deliver a range of environmental outcomes, including improvements in water and air quality, biodiversity and reductions in carbon emissions. The range of measures under consideration includes the planting of hedgerows on farmland as one of the means of offsetting carbon emissions.

The Environmental Farming Scheme currently supports over 5,000 farms via carbon friendly practices including maintaining and establishing native woodland, enhancement of existing / planting of new hedgerows, agro-forestry and peatland restoration.

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the cost to each council in dealing with fly-tipping in each of the last five years. (AQW 18185/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** My Department holds no records of these costs, as District Councils are not currently required to advise DAERA officials of the costs they incur to clean up fly-tipped waste.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will bring forward legislative proposals to ban supertrawlers in local waters. (AQW 18195/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** "Supertrawlers" are typically large fishing vessels, often greater than 100m in length. Whilst they have significant catching capacity they are bound by their fishing quotas, or allocated fishing opportunities. There is no recent history of such vessels fishing in Northern Ireland waters, because they mainly target pelagic species and have little or no fishing opportunities in our waters.

Apart from Irish vessels that can avail of the reciprocal Voisinage fisheries access agreement, EU fleets that have "supertrawlers" have no access to UK waters within 12nm of the coast, which comprises most of the Northern Ireland zone for which we have management responsibility.

In my assessment there is little prospect of "supertrawler" fishing activity in NI waters and no need currently to bring forward legislation to ban such vessels. "Supertrawlers" are however permitted to transit through NI waters as long as they are not fishing and we will monitor the activity of these vessels if they enter our waters.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what inter-Departmental discussions he has had in regard to bringing forward legislative proposals to implement a statutory ban on all current and future fossil fuel exploration, including fracking. (AQW 18196/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** My Department is working with the Department for Economy (DfE) as part of a cross departmental steering committee to manage a research project, commissioned by DfE, into the potential economic, societal and environmental impacts of the development of both conventional and unconventional onshore oil and gas resources in NI.

It is my understanding that the outputs, from this research project, will be used by DfE to inform the development of the NI policy on conventional and unconventional oil and gas exploration and development, including fracking.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will consider introducing a bottle deposit scheme for Northern Ireland. (AQW 18228/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** My officials have been developing options for a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for drinks containers, alongside England and Wales to ensure consistency for major UK suppliers and retailers.

I launched a public consultation on options for the DRS on 24 March 2021, which will close on 4th June 2021.

Further detail on the proposed DRS can be found on the following link. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/introducing-deposit-return-scheme-england-wales-and-northern-ireland>

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the pollution event which occurred on the Auglish River. (AQW 18315/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** On Sunday 2 May the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) received information through the 24 hour pollution hotline advising of a fish kill on the Aghlisk River, near Dromore, County Tyrone.

This information was passed to the Loughs Agency (LA) for investigation. It has been confirmed that a fish kill has impacted approximately 5km of the Aghlisk River. Statutory samples have been collected and the investigation is ongoing.

Fish mortalities include native brown trout and juvenile Atlantic salmon. Attempts to quantify the loss of fish have been hampered by the recent heavy rain but are ongoing.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the quarry currently operating at Craigall, Cullyrammer Road, Kilreagh, County Londonderry was the recipient of an Aggregates Levy Credit Scheme Certificate from his Department.

**(AQW 18347/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The operation of, and compliance with, the Aggregates Levy Scheme is a matter for HMRC. The licencing of the quarry operations and its compliance in this regard is a matter for the Department for the Economy.

## Department for Communities

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of neighbourhood renewal funding awarded in each of the last ten years, including the areas to which the funding was allocated.

**(AQW 16450/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):** The table attached at Annex A details a breakdown of Neighbourhood Renewal funding awarded in each of the five financial years to 2019/20; this is in line with the departmental Retention and Disposal guidance which requires information to be retained for a period of five years. Financial accounts have not been finalised for the current financial year and therefore cannot yet be reported.

Figures reported include revenue and capital spend in each of the 36 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs). Caution is advised in making comparisons of expenditure across NRAs. Expenditure is influenced by factors such as; the population of the area, the historic expenditure and/ or proposed investment in an area from other initiatives or mainstream sources, geographical location and proximity to existing services and the needs identified in Area Action Plans. In addition, spend reported against some NRA's includes support for services that are delivered citywide or across two or more NRAs and spend for such projects cannot be disaggregated.

The table attached at Annex B details a breakdown of funding awarded to Small Pockets of Deprivation (SPODs); and Annex C details a breakdown of funding awarded to Areas at Risk (AaR). Funding to SPODs and AaRs is enabled through People and Place: A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal.

### Annex A

Neighbourhood Renewal Area	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Andersonstown	£ 207,564	£ 179,598	£ 169,938	£ 168,495	£ 171,249
Armagh	£ 399,225	£ 341,667	£ 311,154	£ 334,787	£ 280,968
Ballyclare	£ 148,988	£ 70,382	£ 56,565	£ 49,232	£ 70,180
Ballymena	£ 461,415	£ 183,659	£ 342,023	£ 107,303	£ 174,292
Belfast North and Greater Shankill Citywide	£ 658,942	£ 312,388	£ 522,911	£ 532,334	£ 564,095
Belfast South Wide	£ 119,447	£ 106,860	£ 97,962	£ 103,776	£ 99,212
Brownlow	£ 591,362	£ 369,241	£ 321,479	£ 299,384	£ 298,501
Cityside (Triax)	£ 874,177	£ 758,224	£ 972,098	£ 697,697	£ 704,716
Citywide	£ 905,144	£ 840,562	£ 1,441,010	£ 2,034,106	£ 1,729,623
Coalisland	£ 382,249	£ 1,037,447	£ 133,335	£ 125,389	£ 163,630
Coalisland & Dungannon	£ 365,309	£ 278,549	£ 277,290	£ 265,092	£ 212,609
Coleraine	£ 695,794	£ 656,321	£ 500,705	£ 653,933	£ 560,668
Colin	£ 602,644	£ 718,432	£ 1,894,335	£ 643,071	£ 826,906
Crumlin/Ardoyne	£ 937,741	£ 924,917	£ 929,065	£ 985,047	£ 996,314
Downpatrick	£ 247,522	£ 264,084	£ 242,825	£ 428,142	£ 225,101
Dungannon	£ 147,334	£ 95,411	£ 161,484	£ 77,533	£ 817,339
Enniskillen	£ 556,008	£ 1,002,308	£ 449,556	£ 484,168	£ 412,482
Greater Falls	£ 1,274,659	£ 1,392,039	£ 1,321,252	£ 1,644,107	£ 1,481,284

<b>Neighbourhood Renewal Area</b>	<b>2015/2016</b>	<b>2016/2017</b>	<b>2017/2018</b>	<b>2018/2019</b>	<b>2019/2020</b>
Greater Shankill	£ 1,123,568	£ 1,222,405	£ 1,375,699	£ 1,079,127	£ 1,192,243
Greater West Belfast Citywide	£ 321,300	£ 788,708	£ 227,721	£ 246,570	£ 247,898
Inner East Belfast	£ 1,251,111	£ 861,900	£ 784,998	£ 837,048	£ 798,711
Inner North	£ 728,106	£ 785,507	£ 581,102	£ 485,386	£ 426,437
Inner South Belfast	£ 518,018	£ 413,185	£ 409,565	£ 392,226	£ 426,553
Kilcooley	£ 201,100	£ 223,974	£ 250,704	£ 495,533	£ 200,425
Lenadoon	£ 268,905	£ 274,585	£ 252,414	£ 255,606	£ 188,327
Ligoniel	£ 137,593	£ 131,889	£ 145,022	£ 121,437	£ 128,045
Limavady	£ 168,293	£ 118,411	£ 155,508	£ 167,148	£ 539,075
Lurgan	£ 432,733	£ 671,312	£ 615,662	£ 276,692	£ 298,501
Newry	£ 589,522	£ 825,068	£ 793,659	£ 526,303	£ 738,772
NW Portadown	£ 212,154	£ 260,221	£ 315,999	£ 296,632	£ 304,630
Omagh	£ 277,565	£ 231,268	£ 245,142	£ 351,594	£ 199,749
Outer North	£ 1,002,683	£ 917,068	£ 851,205	£ 810,775	£ 835,603
Outer West	£ 573,045	£ 586,949	£ 523,746	£ 515,053	£ 1,321,989
Rathcoole	£ 155,772	£ 69,218	£ 144,992	£ 68,979	£ 71,141
South West Belfast	£ 487,466	£ 884,879	£ 560,679	£ 557,639	£ 426,533
Strabane	£ 451,944	£ 422,122	£ 503,274	£ 747,033	£ 464,529
Tullycarnet	£ 266,478	£ 273,306	£ 217,173	£ 184,097	£ 192,379
Upper Ardoyne/Ballysillan	£ 297,630	£ 201,747	£ 249,359	£ 254,887	£ 263,825
Upper Springfield/Whiterock	£ 1,089,936	£ 1,258,078	£ 1,193,583	£ 954,358	£ 1,008,588
Waterside	£ 1,049,111	£ 959,338	£ 494,771	£ 506,250	£ 523,126
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>£ 1,179,556</b>	<b>£ 1,913,227</b>	<b>£ 1,036,967</b>	<b>£ 9,763,971</b>	<b>£ 0,586,245</b>

**Annex B**

<b>SPOD Area</b>	<b>2015/2016</b>	<b>2016/2017</b>	<b>2017/2018</b>	<b>2018/2019</b>	<b>2019/2020</b>
Ballymoney SPOD Area	£24,125	£23,787	£23,255	£23,125	£24,125
Bawnmore, Newtownabbey	£13,389	£14,130	£14,130	£14,130	£14,130
Benmore, Finaghy	£25,908	£25,162	£24,168	£23,268	£23,268
Bowtown, Newtownards	£15,000	£13,596	£16,185	£16,756	£16,497
Sunnylands/Greenisland, Carrickfergus	£35,490	£34,626	£37,980	£37,980	£39,480
Sunnylands, Carrickfergus	£23,618	£26,375	£23,303	£23,892	£26,503
Dixon Park, Larne	£10,000	£10,959	£11,724	£10,142	£12,419
Glen, Newtownards	£23,360	£20,056	£23,282	£24,246	£24,246
Harbour, Bangor	£54,011	£55,799	£50,803	£53,838	£54,010
Rathgill, Bangor	£67,335	£69,393	£66,707	£68,387	£67,760
Strathfoyle, Derry	£76,141	£73,787	£69,737	£67,984	£66,618
West Winds, Newtownards	£19,185	£19,903	£18,309	£17,588	£17,985
West Winds, Newtownards	£12,796	£14,420	£14,457	£12,702	£7,000
White City, Belfast	£1,640	£0	£7,956	£7,956	£7,956
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>£402,000</b>	<b>£402,000</b>	<b>£402,000</b>	<b>£402,000</b>	<b>£402,000</b>

## Annex C

Area at Risk (AaR)	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Carnmoney; Monkstown; and Mossley	£75,271	£67,024	£66,750	£66,750	£59,968
Glenbank and Whitewell	£90,000	£60,000	£60,000	£57,600	£57,600
Annadale Haywood Residents Association	£17,267	£27,881	£17,874	£23,859	£15,789
Ballybeen Improvement Group	£31,255	£30,396	£30,622	£27,101	£26,544
Coleraine	£37,280	£36,644	£37,280	£37,280	£36,215
Ballymena Doury Road Development Group	£33,032	£34,227	£35,451	£35,451	£35,451
Larne Factory Community Forum	£38,133	£38,011	£38,133	£38,133	£37,386
Carrickfergus Northlands	£24,908	£29,461	£30,000	£30,000	£30,000
Crossmaglen Community Programme	£27,992	£30,002	£30,000	£24,000	£24,000
Bessbrook Community Programme	£30,000	£30,000	£30,000	£24,000	£24,000
Gilford Community Programme	£30,000	£30,000	£30,000	£24,000	£21,500
Scrabo AaR Project	£13,274	£19,959	£19,682	£17,286	£17,155
Beechfield AaR Project	£8,556	£9,402	£9,081	£8,843	£8,892
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>£456,972</b>	<b>£443,013</b>	<b>£434,876</b>	<b>£414,306</b>	<b>£394,504</b>

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities (i) when the job training opportunities through the proposed Job Start scheme will be provided; (ii) how many places will be available; and (iii) what budget will be attached to the programme.

**(AQW 16626/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The JobStart Scheme launched on Friday 2nd April 2021. It is estimated that the first young people will commence employment by June 2021. The period up to employment commencing is required to assess whether applications from employers meet the criteria for the Scheme, to complete due diligence checks followed by a recruitment exercise for each employer.

My Department hopes to offer over 3,300 job opportunities through the JobStart Scheme.

The Scheme was allocated £20 million in the Executive's budget for 2021/22.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Communities how "imminent threat of closure" was established in respect of each recipient of funding from the Sports Sustainability Fund.

**(AQW 16948/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The objective of the Sports Sustainability Fund is to help stabilise and sustain sports' Governing Bodies, their affiliated clubs and sporting organisations, enabling them to withstand the impacts of COVID-19.

The phrase "imminent threat of closure" was not one of the criteria used in the Sports Sustainability Fund programme or included in the Guidance Notes for applicants.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities to outline plans for new social housing builds in Holywood.

**(AQW 17156/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Executive is working closely with Housing Associations to bring forward new social housing proposals for Holywood, 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 Brogan** asked the Minister for Communities what engagement she has had, or plans to have, with the Minister of Education regarding the provision of childcare to facilitate parents return to work and aid economic recovery.

**(AQW 17265/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The provision of childcare sits with the Department of Education, and is therefore outside the remit of my Department. My Department, as part of its economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has developed a range of new employability initiatives. This includes the expansion of the Adviser Discretion Fund (ADF) in order to support more people to overcome barriers to employment.

Launched on 12 April 2021 it includes plans to make help available through a non-repayable grant of up to £1,500 to those for whom upfront registered childcare costs is acting as a barrier to employment.

This grant is awaiting Executive approval as it will need to be financed from the Block Grant.

In addition, my Department funds the Women's Centre Childcare Fund which provides approximately £800k per annum to provide around 77,000 two-hour childcare sessions through 14 Women's Centres.

**Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister for Communities what action the Housing Executive is taking to address the waiting list for housing in East Londonderry.

**(AQW 17318/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Due to the volume of detail required to answer AQW 17318/17-22, the information has been placed in the Assembly Library.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities whether specific guidance will be made available on the NI Direct website for the community and voluntary sector as COVID-19 restrictions are eased.

**(AQW 17428/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The NI Direct website contains current COVID 19 information and guidance for individuals and organisations. Community and Voluntary sector organisations should continue to apply the most up to date rules and guidance set by The Executive Office, Public Health Agency, and Department of Health in the coming weeks and months as the restrictions are eased.

My Department supports the 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 Allister** asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of the funding that her Department has awarded to Irish language groups in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 17495/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Department for Communities has provided funding to Foras na Gaeilge & made COVID relief payments to Irish language groups in the last three years (£stg) as follows:

Year	Foras Na Gaeilge	COVID Relief
2020/21	£3,193,549	£1,389,152
2019/20	£3,309,404	N/A
2018/19	£3,318,664	N/A

In relation to any other payments, I would refer the Member to the Government Funding Database which provides details of all funding provided by the public sector, including arm's length bodies, to groups within the voluntary and community sector, including the Irish language sector.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities how much funding will be allocated to North Down for social housing for this financial year.

**(AQW 17527/17-22)**

**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.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Communities to detail her plans to minimise the number of people living in housing stress in South Antrim.

**(AQW 17579/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I am committed to ensuring more social homes are built and allocated where they are needed. A radical housing transformation plan was outlined toward the end of last year and the department and key stakeholder are currently progressing this.

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/housing-statement-communities-minister-caral-ni-chuilin-3-november-2020>

The Housing Executive has advised that it is working closely with Housing Associations to bring forward proposals to address housing need in the South Antrim Constituency. At the end of March 2021 there were 1,592 applicants on the waiting list in the South Antrim Parliamentary Constituency, of which 1,178 were in housing stress. The annual allocations to applicants was 237 homes. 131 new social housing units are under construction. I have provided you with details of these units are detailed in the following table.



Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Ark	53 Mill Road	Crumlin	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	11	2018/19	2021/22
Ark	Main Street	Randalstown	Off The Shelf	General Needs	12	2020/21	2021/22
Connswater	Milewater Road (T)	New Mossley	New Build	General Needs	34	2020/21	2022/23
Connswater	Milewater Road (T)	New Mossley	New Build	Active Elderly	10	2020/21	2022/23
Connswater	Milewater Road (T)	New Mossley	New Build	Physically Disabled	6	2020/21	2022/23
Connswater	181 Ballyclare Road	Newtownabbey	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	14	2020/21	2022/23
Connswater	181 Ballyclare Road	Newtownabbey	Competitive Design & Build	Physically Disabled	3	2020/21	2022/23
Rural	Main Street	Doagh	New Build	General Needs	6	2020/21	2022/23
Rural	99-101 Main Street	Randalstown	New Build	General Needs	9	2020/21	2022/23
Triangle	31 Belfast Road	Antrim	Off the Shelf	General Needs	8	2020/21	2022/23
Triangle	31 Belfast Road	Antrim	Off the Shelf	Active Elderly	18	2020/21	2022/23

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Communities to detail any plans her Department has to increase investment and to market Navan Fort in Armagh as a world heritage site.

**(AQW 17619/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Navan Fort is one of six archaeological sites that Ireland added to its Tentative List for inscription as UNESCO World Heritage Sites as part of a transnational nomination, Tentative List status does not guarantee World Heritage Site status. It is therefore not possible to market Navan Fort as a World Heritage Site.

My Department will continue to work closely with all partners, particularly Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, to promote this highly significant archaeological site.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) new claimants; and (ii) reassessments awaiting an assessment appointment for Personal Independence Payment, broken down by the number of weeks waiting.

**(AQW 17629/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The table below sets out the information requested:

Weeks Waiting	New Claimants awaiting an assessment appointment	Reassessments awaiting an assessment appointment
1	14	8
2	333	192
3	526	418
4	540	148
5	249	324
6	548	296
7	404	352
8	441	426

Weeks Waiting	New Claimants awaiting an assessment appointment	Reassessments awaiting an assessment appointment
9	477	493
10	333	507
11	420	495
12	245	320
13	74	348
14	50	551
15	35	96
16	5	2
17	2	1
18	2	1
19	1	2
20	1	1
21	0	1
22	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>4700</b>	<b>4983</b>

This includes cases where the original appointment has been rescheduled at the customer's request so adding to waiting times.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities how many bungalows were built in each constituency in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 17632/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** At Table 1 below I have attached details of the total social housing bungalow completions during the period 2016/17 – 2020/21, broken down by Parliamentary Constituency. Please note that these figures include Supported Housing bungalow provision.

**Table 1 below social housing bungalow completions during the period 2016/17 – 2020/21, broken down by Parliamentary Constituency.**

Parliamentary Constituency	Total social housing bungalows completed					Totals
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	
East Antrim	0	1	0	2	5	8
North Antrim	0	3	1	0	3	7
South Antrim	0	1	2	11	0	14
Upper Bann	1	4	4	0	1	10
East Belfast	0	2	6	0	1	9
North Belfast	3	8	1	0	1	13
South Belfast	1	0	3	1	2	7
West Belfast	0	7	3	1	0	11
North Down	3	3	5	1	3	15
South Down	0	0	2	1	2	5
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	0	0	1	0	1	2
Foyle	23	4	1	5	3	36
Lagan Valley	1	1	2	4	0	8
East Derry	0	1	0	0	2	3

Parliamentary Constituency	Total social housing bungalows completed					
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	Totals
Mid Ulster	0	0	0	1	0	1
Newry & Armagh	1	1	0	0	0	2
Strangford	3	3	0	0	1	7
West Tyrone	1	1	0	4	0	6
<b>Totals</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>164</b>

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister for Communities when her Department will produce a COVID-19 related roadmap for the performing arts, including clarity for performers who perform live music in licensed premises.

**(AQW 17665/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Executive's approach to relaxation is set out in "Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions". That document includes pathways for culture, arts and entertainment and for hospitality services.

The Executive has also agreed that the restrictions in place will be considered through regular comprehensive formal reviews, the dates of which were included in the pathways document.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities how she is addressing ongoing anti-social behaviours that impact Housing Executive and social housing tenants and the wider community.

**(AQW 17692/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive and registered housing associations (RHAs) have a range of powers at their disposal for dealing with antisocial behaviour (ASB).

The Department's Regulatory Framework for RHAs requires social housing providers to work in partnership with other agencies to ensure neighbourhoods are safe and that ASB is tackled effectively. All RHAs are required to have an ASB policy and the Department will seek evidence of compliance with policies when instances of ASB arise.

My Department is represented on a multi-agency Delivery Group established by the Department of Justice to consider the findings from recent consultation by that Department, to review ASB legislation, and to ensure that relevant agencies have effective and proportionate enforcement powers in place.

The consultation outcome report on the Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations included proposals for legislative changes that will enable the Housing Executive to ensure that, prior to the award of a tenancy, it is content that an applicant has not been involved in unacceptable behaviour that would make them ineligible.

the Department has provided guidance to the Housing Executive to assist decision making on eligibility in light of anti-social/unacceptable behaviour.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities how many individuals and families, that were defined as homeless or in housing stress, are currently in temporary accommodation.

**(AQW 17693/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive has informed me that as of 23rd April 2021, there were a total of 3,276 households who were in temporary accommodation provided by the Housing Executive. Of those 3,276 households, 3,160 households were accepted as statutorily homeless. The remaining 116 households were still awaiting a decision on their homelessness application and temporary accommodation was being provided as part of the Housing Executive interim duty.

It should be noted that these figures are taken from a live database and include placements made while homelessness applications are being assessed to determine if the statutory threshold is met.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities when are the COVID-19 accommodation arrangements due to end; and how many of those individuals or families have been provided with future accommodation when temporary accommodation arrangements end.

**(AQW 17694/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive has statutory responsibility for responding to Homelessness.

The Housing Executive's Reset Plan outlining its homelessness response to Covid-19, including a summary of various stages up to March 2022 can be accessed at: <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-reset-plan-the-way-home>

With regard to the future provision of permanent accommodation for those currently in Temporary Accommodation, the Housing Executive will continue to make offers to families and individuals as accommodation becomes available. During the

2020/21 financial year a total of 1,374 households were moved from Temporary Accommodation to permanent social housing and efforts to ensure that offers of appropriate accommodation are made will continue.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities (i) for an update on the discussions she has had with the Department of Work and Pensions and the Treasury in relation to ending the six month rule for people with terminal illness; (ii) how far the proposals or criteria defining terminal illness have reached; and (iii) when she will update the public on progress.

**(AQW 17695/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I recognise the devastating impact terminal illness has on individuals and their families and am committed to reforming provision in social security benefits for those who are terminally ill.

On 10 March 2021 I had a meeting with Justin Tomlinson MP (Department for Work and Pensions Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work), and pressed him to publish the outcome of the terminal illness evaluation work that commenced in July 2019.

My officials continue to undertake policy development and analytical work on proposals to reform the 6 months rule. Once this is completed and the necessary approvals secured, I will announce the way forward.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Communities to detail any prospective areas and sites being considered to meet the demand for social housing in East Londonderry.

**(AQW 17701/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** There are currently 126 new social housing units under construction in the East Derry Parliamentary Constituency. I have included details of these in Table 1 below.

A total of 95 units are currently programmed to start as part of the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP 2021/22 – 2022/23). I have included details of these in Table 2 below.

In areas where housing need is identified, Housing Associations are encouraged to look out for potential sites for development in areas of identified social housing need as set out in the Housing Executive Commissioning Prospectus which accompanies the SHDP.

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.

**Table 1: Social housing units under construction in East Derry Parliamentary Constituency**

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3 (T)	Dungiven	New Build	General Needs	18	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3 (T)	Dungiven	New Build	Physically Disabled	4	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3A (T)	Dungiven	New Build	Physically Disabled	1	2020/21	2022/23
Ark	Railway Road	Coleraine	Off The Shelf	General Needs	12	2020/21	2021/22
Choice	The Hill, Portstewart	Portstewart	New Build	General Needs	9	2020/21	2022/23
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	57	2019/20	2021/22
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	Competitive Design & Build	Active Elderly	12	2019/20	2021/22
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	Competitive Design & Build	Physically Disabled	6	2019/20	2021/22
Triangle	Harpurs Hill, Phase 2 (T)	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	4	2020/21	2022/23
Triangle	Harpurs Hill, Phase 2 (T)	Coleraine	New Build	Physically Disabled	3	2020/21	2022/23

**Table 2: Social housing units programmed to start 2021/22 – 2023/24 in East Derry Parliamentary Constituency**

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex Housing	Coastguard Road	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	6	2021/22	2022/23
Choice	Keely Gardens (T)	Aghadowey	New Build	General Needs	4	2021/22	2022/23
Choice	Captain Street	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	31	2022/23	2024/25
Choice	Captain Street	Coleraine	New Build	Wheelchair	4	2022/23	2024/25
Choice	Beresford Avenue	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	50	2022/23	2024/25

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Communities to outline (i) the steps she has taken to address the rising number of children living in both relative and absolute poverty; (ii) her assessment of this trend; and (iii) the conversations she has had with other bodies and Executive Ministers in relation to addressing child poverty.

**(AQW 17702/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** In order to ensure that government continues to work collectively to tackle the issues faced by children and families impacted by poverty the Executive's current Child Poverty Strategy, has been extended to May 2022. The most recent Child Poverty Annual Report, for 2019/20, was published on the Department for Communities website in September 2020. It is planned that the Child Poverty Annual Report for 2020/21 will be published in the coming weeks.

An Executive Anti-Poverty Strategy is currently being developed by my Department. It is proposed that the Executive's actions to address child poverty will be contained within the new Anti-Poverty Strategy. The Anti-Poverty Strategy is being developed using a co-design approach with input from key stakeholders and Executive departments. A Ministerial Steering Group will meet at key points in the development of the Strategy to provide an opportunity for Executive colleagues to discuss progress and agree the way forward. The first Ministerial Steering Group meeting took place on 14 April.

Work to develop the Strategy is continuing at pace, with a public consultation exercise scheduled for later in the year. Further information on the co-design process and timetable can be found at: Social Inclusion Strategies Department for Communities ([communities-ni.gov.uk](https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk)) (<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/social-inclusion-strategies>).

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Communities how much of the £17.6m COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme has been invested in (i) Coleraine; (ii) Limavady; (iii) Garvagh; (iv) Kilrea; and (v) Dungiven.

**(AQW 17703/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Department for Communities, in collaboration with DAERA and DfI, has led the delivery of the £19.3m Covid-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme across all Council areas. Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, which covers all of the towns you have listed, has received a total allocation of £1.45m broken down as follows: DfC £738k capital and £41k revenue; DAERA £276k capital; and DfI £395k capital.

Funding was provided to support revitalisation plans that had been developed by Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council in conjunction with key stakeholders, and bespoke to needs identified in their Council area.

It is not possible to provide a breakdown of how much has been invested specifically in Coleraine, Limavady, Garvagh, Kilrea and Dungiven at this time, as Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council is still processing grant applications received and is finalising the delivery of a range of initiatives across the Borough.

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the new social homes start target; and (ii) the actual number started, in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 17714/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:**

- (i) Whilst a budget has been set at £162 million for new social housing in 2021/22, the starts target has yet to be confirmed.
- (ii) In the table below I have provided details the total social housing starts, compared to the annual targets for social housing starts, for the period 2016/17 – 2020/21.

Year	Start Target	Actual Starts
2016/17	1600	1604
2017/18	1750	1759

Year	Start Target	Actual Starts
2018/19	1850	1786
2019/20	1850	761
2020/21	1850	2403

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of applicants taken off the housing waiting list without being housed in the last five years, broken down by the reason for removal.

**(AQW 17715/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The table below details the number of housing applications that have been cancelled from the social housing Waiting List in the last 5 years, presented by the reason which is recorded on the Housing Executive's Housing Management System.

Cancellation Description	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	5 year Total
Application withdrawn	1063	825	598	593	747	3826
Applicant appear on more than one application	170	92	33	13	31	339
Applicant's request	1728	1674	1251	1019	1247	6919
ASB eligibility	43	41	28	33	41	186
Bought house	32	37	48	35	34	186
Applicant Deceased	222	208	216	186	140	972
Left address known	53	46	39	44	45	227
Left address unknown	463	415	299	268	179	1624
No access	1463	1097	405	430	620	4015
No connection to NI eligibility	188	109	70	66	38	471
No reply to renewal reminder	7593	7306	6659	5302	1600	28460
Person From Abroad (PFA) eligibility	231	239	276	221	181	1148
Private Rented Access Scheme Tenancy	11	35	22	5	4	77
Rehoused other	111	114	84	90	65	464
Rehoused private sector	242	224	205	137	153	961
Under 18 eligibility	53	85	59	81	55	333
Incompatible code	102	93	57	44	32	328
<b>Total</b>	<b>13768</b>	<b>12640</b>	<b>10349</b>	<b>8567</b>	<b>5212</b>	<b>50536</b>

A number of applicants are 'temporarily' removed from the waiting list for a period of a time following a 'Deferral' in line with policies and procedures and the statutory rules of the Housing Selection Scheme. Once the deferral period has expired these cases are automatically added back on to the Waiting List. Those cases are not included in this table.

A number of cases have been identified as having an incorrect cancellation reason and are included in the final row of the table under 'Incompatible Code'. These cases are currently being investigated.

Some applicants who are removed from the Waiting List may subsequently re-apply for social housing at a later date and are therefore re-included on the Waiting List.

Following the first lockdown in March 2020, changes were made to the Waiting List annual renewals process and procedures to accommodate the COVID-19 restrictions.

These changes were in place throughout 2020/2021 and may have resulted in a number of applicants being retained on the Waiting List who would otherwise have been removed as a result of the No Reply to Renewal Reminder process under normal operational activity.

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the new social homes completion target; and (ii) the actual number completed, in each of the last 5 years

**(AQW 17716/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** In the table below I have provided details of the total social housing completions, compared to the annual targets for social housing completions, for the period 2016/17 – 2020/21.

The Housing Executive have yet to confirm what their target for completions will be in 2021/22.

Year	Completions Target	Actual Completions
2016/17	1,200	1,387
2017/18	1,200	1,507
2018/19	1,450	1,682
2019/20	1,500	1,626
2020/21	1,200	1,304

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the (i) number; and (ii) location of designated accommodation reserved for over 55s in East Belfast.

**(AQW 17722/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive have advised that it does not have any stock designated for over 55s in East Belfast. Registered Housing Associations provided the following information on stock designated for over 55s in East Belfast.

Housing Association	Location	Units
St Matthews	Sean Martin House, Short Strand	11
	MacAirt House, Short Strand	8
Connswater	Lower Braniel Road	15
Triangle	Connsbrook Avenue	27
	Upper Newtownards Road	15
Habinteg	Parkgate Avenue	12
	Brandon Court	18
	Upper Newtownards Road	6
Radius	145 Castlereagh Road	12
	149 Castlereagh Road	8
	151 Castlereagh Road	5
	Abbey Court, Abbey Gardens	39
	Cairnshill Court, Cairnshill Road	22
	Donovan Court, Donovan Parade	11
	Donovan Fold, Donovan Parade	42
	Knockbrook Manor, Knock Road	12
	Loopland Land, Loopland Gardens	27
	Lisavon Court, Lisavon Street	11
	Orchard Mews	14
	Laburnum Court	40
	Richardson Court, Richardson Street.	35
Abbeyfield and Wesley	Fleming House, Palmerston Road	14
	Stutt House, Palmerston Road	8

Housing Association	Location	Units
Clanmill	Henderson Court, Mertoun Park	37
	Hughes Court, Mount Merrion Avenue	58
	Greenville Court, Woodcot Avenue,	34
Alpha	Johnston Court, Green Road	30
	Giffen Place, Barnetts Road	14
Choice	Kingscourt Avenue, Willowfield & Upper Castlereagh	12
	Greer House, Willowfield	18
	Hutchinson House, Woodstock	15
	Glenview Wood, Ballygowan Road	31
	Glenluce Green / Glendu Park, Garnerville Road	19
	Charlton House, Woodstock	11
<b>Total</b>		<b>691</b>

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties in East Belfast that are (i) void; and (ii) derelict.

**(AQW 17723/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive have advised that:

- (i) As of 1st April 2021, the Housing Executive had 116 void properties in the East Belfast Parliamentary Constituency.
- (ii) The Housing Executive does not possess a reporting category for void properties that corresponds to 'derelict', and therefore information on which if any of these properties is derelict is not available.

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the number (ii) the location of Housing Executive 4 bed properties in Belfast, broken down by constituency.

**(AQW 17724/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The table below shows current number of 4 bedroom Housing Executive stock in Belfast broken down by Parliamentary Constituency.

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of 4 bed properties
Belfast West	547
Belfast North	393
Belfast South	156
Belfast East	187
<b>Belfast Total</b>	<b>1283</b>

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the (a) number; and (b) location of sites identified for social housing in Belfast, broken down by constituency; and (ii) the (a) number; and (b) type of accommodation designated for each potential site.

**(AQW 17725/17-22)**

**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

**Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for Communities whether the translation hub will be available for Irish Medium Schools to get materials translated for their pupils.

**(AQW 17744/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Irish Medium Schools can have materials translated to/from either Irish or Ulster-Scots by my department's central translation hub.



**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the properties her Department owns in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area that are currently unused; (ii) the annual cost of maintaining these properties; and (iii) the plans for their future use.

**(AQW 17761/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department does not own properties in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area that are currently unused.

The member is asked to note that the term 'Properties' has been interpreted as referring to buildings. The Department does however own vacant land, and a response to a similar Assembly Question - AQW 13717/17-22 in relation to vacant land, is available in the Assembly Library.

**Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the four sites currently being held by the Housing Executive in Foyle. **(AQW 17811/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive currently has 2 sites in Foyle listed on its Undeveloped Land Schedule as shown in table 1 below. In addition, the Housing Executive has 26 sites listed classified as Existing Open Space Yes which are considered to have development potential subject to overcoming planning constraints. Details of these sites are provided in table 2 below.

**Table 1: Foyle ULS Sites**

Ref No.	Parliamentary Constituency	Address	Region	Site Area (HA)	Classification
701/7	Foyle	Cedar Court	North	0.59	Retain for Future Use
701/455	Foyle	Cedar Street	North	0.02	Retain for Future Use

**Table 2: Foyle EOS Yes Sites**

Ref No.	Parliamentary Constituency	Address	Region	Site Area (HA)
701/12	Foyle	Lecky Road, Derry	North	0.07
701/97	Foyle	Adjacent Creggan Reservoir, Derry	North	1.6
702/7	Foyle	Killycor Avenue, Claudy	North	0.22
702/13	Foyle	Moyglass Place Sites 1 & 2	North	0.14
702/37	Foyle	Primity Crescent Newbuildings	North	0.48
702/84	Foyle	Ridgeway Drive, Currynierin	North	0.49
702/191	Foyle	Strabane Old Road, Derry	North	0.79
702/238	Foyle	Lapwing Way, Derry	North	0.37
702/306	Foyle	Kinsale Park	North	0.27
703/1	Foyle	Aileach Rd, Ballymagroarty	North	0.59
703/5	Foyle	Drumard Park	North	0.57
703/7	Foyle	Ringfort Road	North	1.02
703/6	Foyle	Coshquin Road	North	3.35
703/70	Foyle	95-99 Fergleen Park, Derry	North	0.18
703/79	Foyle	Brookdale Park, Derry	North	3.3
703/85	Foyle	Moss Road, Galliagh	North	0.4
703/88	Foyle	Glengalliagh Road, Derry	North	2.14
703/89	Foyle	Glengalliagh Road / Broomfield Park, Derry	North	2.2
703/90	Foyle	Glengalliagh Road / Fern Road, Derry	North	0.8
703/179	Foyle	Elaghmore Park (2)	North	0.26
703/180	Foyle	Elaghmore Park (3)	North	0.44
703/243	Foyle	Adjacent CoJC&LDS, Carnhill	North	0.5

Ref No.	Parliamentary Constituency	Address	Region	Site Area (HA)
703/245	Foyle	Carnhill (2)	North	0.53
703/247	Foyle	Carnhill (4)	North	5.84
703/248	Foyle	Collon Lane	North	0.46
703/492	Foyle	Aileach Road, Friel House	North	2.13

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update Strabane Public Realm scheme.  
(AQW 17859/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The business case for the Strabane Town Centre Public Realm Scheme is currently being finalised by the project promoters, Derry City and Strabane District Council. Upon receipt of the final business case, my Department will then consider the business case and associated funding approval in the context of the Department's wider budgetary considerations.

**Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to the COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan published in July 2020, (i) for her assessment of its recommendations; (ii) what steps her Department will take in relation to its recommendations; and (iii) how the recommendations are being factored into the future Programme for Government outcomes.

(AQW 17864/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** I welcome the COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan, which makes a range of recommendations targeted at mitigating the impact of the pandemic on women. I recognise the particular issues faced by women in our communities as a result of COVID-19 which are highlighted in the report. This pandemic has had a devastating impact on many areas, including employment, carers, and those already in poverty. It has exacerbated existing inequalities in our society, not least those faced by women.

My Department is leading the development of the Executive's suite of four social inclusion strategies, including a Gender Equality Strategy.

The recommendations in the Recovery Plan cut across all Executive departments and are largely reflected in the published Gender Equality Expert Advisory Panel Report. (<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-publishes-expert-advisory-panel-reports-social-inclusion-strategies>). As such, the relevant recommendations are currently being considered in the development of the Gender Equality Strategy, which will include agreed actions from a range of departments.

The social inclusion strategies will underpin the new Programme for Government and each department is expected to factor relevant outcomes into the development of the actions they contribute to the strategies.

Subject to Executive agreement, it is anticipated that the new social inclusion strategies will be published in December 2021, following public consultation.

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the terms of reference for the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer working group.

(AQW 17873/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The overall purpose of the Advisory Working Group (AWG) for the Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer (SRSP), as set out in the terms of reference, is to guide and support a 'refresh and re-engagement' exercise that provides a robust evidence base on the challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer from International level down to youth development.

The terms of reference detail the main responsibilities of the AWG as follows:

- 1 To oversee and facilitate evidence gathering on sub-regional sector needs, with a particular emphasis on identifying organisational and strategic changes that have impacted since 2011.
- 2 To oversee primary research/data capture exercises as needed.
- 3 To advise and input on the 'mapping exercise' underway via DfC's Professional Services Unit. This is mapping all Premier/Intermediate level club grounds and Councils pitches, showing the overall distribution.
- 4 To input into the relevant programme and policy linkages that will apply at sub-regional levels and which will need to be factored into the business case development (e.g. Community Plans, Council Pitches Strategies, etc).
- 5 Arising from findings from the work entailed in (1) to (4) above to advise on the re-validation and refinement of the core objectives to maximise their potential contribution to the SRSP.

- 6 To review and sign off on the strategic investment priorities/funding strands for the SRSP, which will emanate from the above stages of work for inclusion in the business case(s) that will be needed to secure funding approval. If required the AWG will support further consultation on the strategic investment priorities/ funding strands.
- 7 To co-design the delivery / implementation structure for the SRSP with input as needed from relevant stakeholders

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the timeline provided to the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer working group to (i) report; or (ii) provide feedback to her Department.

**(AQW 17874/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The purpose of the Advisory Working Group (AWG) was established to provide my Department with expert insight into soccer facility needs. AWG members meet with the Department bi-monthly, providing feedback to the Department during these meetings. My Officials also engage with members of the AWG on an ad hoc basis where their knowledge or expertise is required to guide progress on specific issues.

This ongoing engagement is guiding the shape and scope of the programme and will inform my updates to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme.

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities how many submissions her Department has received from the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer working group.

**(AQW 17875/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the total number of submissions received by her Department from stakeholders providing feedback or information to shape the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer.

**(AQW 17876/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Stakeholder engagement has been critical in the current refresh of the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer. A wide range of stakeholders have provided information and feedback, including:

- The Advisory Working Group, which includes representatives from my Department, Sport NI, the IFA, NIFL and the Chief Leisure Officers Association, have to date met on six occasions to provide expert advice on the proposed shape of the Programme.
- In August 2020, my Department issued a survey to all local soccer clubs at all levels across the region. The purpose of the survey was to identify up-to-date profiles of clubs, their facilities and what they needed in terms of 'fit-for-purpose' and inclusive facilities to achieve strategic priorities for soccer. A total of 90 responses were received from the 467 clubs contacted. There was over 80% response rate from NIFL affiliated clubs.
- My officials continue to have 1-2-1 strategic discussions and exchange of information with key stakeholders, including the IFA, NIFL, Sport NI, all 11 Councils and Disability Sport NI. In addition to discussions with my departmental officials, written input to inform the development of the programme has been received from the IFA, NIFL and MEA United.

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the demand for 4-bed Housing Executive properties in Belfast, broken down by constituency.

**(AQW 17882/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive has advised the Department of the following information.

Table 1 below provides a breakdown of all Applicants on the waiting list, as of the 1st April 2021, who -

- have a 1st preference area of choice within a Parliamentary Constituency in Belfast
- have a 'calculated' 4 bedroom entitlement for that area of choice

It should be noted that, in certain circumstances, the Housing Selection Scheme (HSS) rules can afford an additional bedroom entitlement to an applicant, based on their individual needs. As the 4 bedroom entitlement in this dataset corresponds to the minimum bedroom requirements under the rules of the HSS, the 'actual' bedroom need of some applicants included in it may vary from the 'calculated' need.

**Table 1**

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of Applicants
Belfast East	50
Belfast East/South *	<10
Belfast North	107
Belfast South	73
Belfast South/Strangford *	<10

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of Applicants
Belfast West	104
Belfast West/North *	<10
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>346</b>

\* The reporting unit for Housing Executive stock is the Common Landlord Area (CLA) and in some places these CLAs traverse parliamentary boundaries so, for reporting purposes, a hybrid parliamentary category has been created. Table 2 lists the CLAs and the corresponding parliamentary category to provide context to Table 1.

**Table 2**

CLA	Parliamentary Constituency
Cregagh Castlereagh	Belfast East/South
Willowfield/Upper Castlereagh Road	Belfast East/South
Carryduff	Belfast South/Strangford
Ainsworth	Belfast West/North
Twaddell/Upper Woodvale	Belfast West/North
Hamill St / John St	Belfast West/South
Carrick Hill / Unity Flats	Belfast West/North
Bridge End / Rotherdam Court	Belfast East/South

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the review of Housing Executive allocation points.  
(AQW 17883/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** In December 2020, I published a Consultation Outcome Report, setting out the findings of the 2017 consultation on “A Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations”. The Housing Executive will now establish a project team to take forward implementation of 18 of the 20 proposals.

Two proposals – the removal of intimidation points and the removal of interim accommodation points will not proceed as I want to retain these points for those who really need them. I have asked my officials to develop alternative proposals for my consideration. I am confident that these changes will make our Selection Scheme fairer and better at responding to objective need.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities when she will make a decision on the allocation of funding for the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer.

(AQW 17953/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the “New Decade, New Approach” agreement and I am committed to its implementation. My Department has been working to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels.

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.

I intend to update Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme, identifying the potential timelines for delivery and levels of support available to clubs 0.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities whether the budget for the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer, which was established approximately 10 years ago, will be inflation proofed.

(AQW 17954/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:**

**it is for the Executive to consider any changes in the funding available for this Programme, including those in relation to inflation.**

**Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister for Communities how many people on the homeless list are waiting housing allocation, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 18004/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive has provided the following table detailing the housing need figures broken down by constituency as at end March 2021.

<b>March 2021 NI/PC</b>	<b>All Applicants</b>	<b>Applicants in Housing Stress</b>	<b>Applicants in Full Duty Applicant Status</b>
Belfast East	2082	1375	932
Belfast East/South*	490	302	200
Belfast North	4445	3302	2573
Belfast South	2638	1947	1571
Belfast South/Strangford*	79	66	54
Belfast West	3803	3023	2497
Belfast West/North*	100	64	50
Belfast West/South*	27	23	20
East Antrim	1665	1092	829
East Derry	2450	1324	905
Fermanagh South Tyrone	1930	1277	747
Foyle	4535	3336	2799
Lagan Valley	2095	1501	1125
Mid Ulster	1304	718	443
Newry & Armagh	2297	1683	1221
North Antrim	2207	1320	973
North Down	1840	1284	898
South Antrim	1592	1178	925
South Down	1975	1495	1117
Strangford	1658	1124	733
Upper Bann	2958	1754	970
West Tyrone	1801	1100	635
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>43971</b>	<b>30288</b>	<b>22217</b>

\*The following Common Landlord Areas cross Parliamentary Constituency Boundaries:

<b>NIHE CLA</b>	<b>Parliamentary Constituency</b>
Cregagh/Castlereagh	Belfast East/South
Willowfield/Upper Castlereagh Road	Belfast East/South
Carryduff	Belfast South/Strangford
Ainsworth	Belfast West/North
Twaddell/Upper Woodvale	Belfast West/North
Hamill St/John St	Belfast West/South
Carrick Hill/Unity Flats	Belfast West/North
Bridge End/Rotherdam Court	Belfast East/South

**Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister for Communities to detail any prospective areas and sites being considered to meet the demand for social housing in Mid Ulster.

**(AQW 18005/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** There are currently 15 social housing units under construction within the Mid Ulster Parliamentary Constituency. This is a Clanmil Housing scheme which is located at Molesworth Plaza in Cookstown.

Choice Housing Association is reviewing potential delivery of new social housing on two sites currently in Housing Executive ownership in Magherafelt (Leckagh Cottages and Killowen Drive), which could accommodate up to 24 units in total.

Connswater Homes is also programmed to start 20 new social homes at (lands to the rear of) 85-101 Church Street in Cookstown in 2022/23.

In addition to the above proposals, Rural Housing is seeking to deliver 7 new social homes in Swatragh in 2022/23 (for which the need was identified via a Latent Demand Test by the Housing Executive). A number of Housing Associations are also investigating potential opportunities for new social housing in Draperstown.

The Housing Executive are aware of other prospective areas and sites being considered to meet the demand for social housing in Mid Ulster. However, these proposals are at any early stage and are yet to be formally programmed for delivery as part of the Social Housing Development Programme.

The need for new social housing in Mid Ulster has also been highlighted in the Housing Executive's 'Commissioning Prospectus' for the period 2021/22 – 2023/24, which was recently published on the Housing Executive's website: Commissioning Prospectus 2021/22 - 2023/2024 (<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Corporate/Commissioning-Prospectus-2021-23.aspx>)

**Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister for Communities to detail any proposed new build housing in Mid Ulster over the next three years, broken down by (i) Housing Association; and (ii) location.  
**(AQW 18006/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** At Table 1 below I have detailed the social housing units programmed to start as part of the Social Housing Development Programme 2021/22 – 2023/24, within the Mid Ulster Parliamentary Constituency. I have also included details of the provider and location.

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 Competitive Design & Build procurement route and/or 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 2021/22 – 2023/24

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Mid Ulster	Choice	Leckagh Cottages (T)	Magherafelt	9	2021/22	2022/23
Mid Ulster	Choice	Killowen Drive (T)	Magherafelt	13	2021/22	2022/23
Mid Ulster	Choice	Killowen Drive (T)	Magherafelt	2	2021/22	2022/23
Mid Ulster	Rural	Swatragh	Swatragh	7	2022/23	2023/24
Mid Ulster	Connswater	Chapel Road	Cookstown	14	2022/23	2023/24

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 16798/17-22, how many applicants to the Individuals Emergency Resilience Programme were impacted by the £1200 cap per piece of equipment.  
**(AQW 18036/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The second phase of the Individuals Emergency Resilience Programme (IERP2) was a resource funding programme with a maximum grant of £5000, although a proportion of the grant could be allowed for small items of capital equipment. As explained in my reply to your question AQW 15740/17-22, a maximum of £1,200 was applied for capital elements per application.

Arts Council records show that there were 1,564 awards from IERP2 and that 798 of those included some element of equipment. The £1,200 limit was applied in each case.

Information on how many of the successful applications had originally sought more than £1,200 for capital equipment is not recorded separately.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities how many people have been awaiting a personal independence appeal hearing for (i) 4 to 12 weeks; (ii) 12 to 26 weeks; (iii) 26 to 38 weeks; (iv) 38 to 52 weeks; and (v) 52 weeks or more.  
**(AQW 18090/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The number of people awaiting a personal independence appeal hearing in each of the categories requested is set out in the table below.

Week Range	PIP Appeals
4 to 12 Weeks	472

Week Range	PIP Appeals
13 to 26 Weeks	755
27 to 38 Weeks	449
39 to 51 Weeks	177
52 Weeks or More	4079
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>5932</b>

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities what assurances she can give that anyone being transferred from legacy benefits onto Universal Credit will have transitional protection.

**(AQW 18091/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** People in receipt of existing legacy benefits<sup>1</sup> who experience a relevant change of circumstances that triggers a new benefit claim will naturally move onto Universal Credit at that time. Where there is a change of circumstances, different amounts of benefit may be payable, therefore transitional protection is not applicable for these people.

Under the next phase of Universal Credit roll out - Move to UC, people in receipt of legacy benefits will move onto Universal Credit.

I can confirm that every person who makes a claim to Universal Credit during the Move to UC phase will receive Transitional Protection, meaning they will not receive less in Universal Credit at the outset than they would have in the previous legacy benefits - assuming their circumstances remain the same.

1 Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based), Employment Support Allowance (Income Related), Housing Benefit (Rental), Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit

In addition, following the removal of the Severe Disability Premium (SDP) Gateway on 27 January, anyone with an entitlement to a SDP in their legacy benefit, when they move to Universal Credit, will receive a transitional payment broadly equivalent to the rate of SDP payable with the legacy benefit.

Some people will be financially better off on Universal Credit and anyone considering moving from their existing legacy benefit to Universal Credit should seek independent advice and check their entitlement using a benefits calculator.

The Independent Welfare Changes helpline is available for anyone needing help or advice about any changes to the welfare system, and can be contacted on 0800 915 4604.

A benefits calculator is available on the nidirect website <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/benefits-calculator>

#### **Annex A**

AQW4833/17-22

**Kellie Armstrong MLA** asked the Minister to (i) to detail the communication Minister, and her Department, has had with the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury regarding the suspension of the Move to Universal Credit; (ii) when the Move to Universal Credit is expected to happen; and (iii) what plans she has to introduce transitional protections for people moved off legacy benefits before the Move to Universal Credit is introduced.

#### **Answer**

(i) I am committed to protecting the vulnerable in our society and so officials in my Department engage regularly and closely with their counterparts in DWP on all aspects of Universal Credit as it continues to embed here and in GB.

On the move to Universal Credit, a DWP pilot started in July 2019, with the aim of testing a number of possible approaches, including the calculation of transitional protection to support people through the next phase, known as Move to UC. I am aware that due to the Coronavirus outbreak and the need to meet the priority of responding to unprecedented demand and getting payment to those who need it as quickly as possible, the Move to UC pilot in GB has been temporarily suspended for the time being.

(ii) While my Department had work ongoing in planning for a future Move to UC exercise, including monitoring closely the pilot in GB, people here were not included in the DWP pilot. However, as a result of the pandemic my Department has also faced an unprecedented increase in demand for services with reduced staff capacity. All available resources are being directed to delivering essential frontline services to those who need them, in particular the most vulnerable in our communities. Resumption of non - essential activity including work on planning for the Move to UC phase here, will take place at an appropriate time.

(iii) The UK Government has made a commitment that those people who make a claim to UC during the Move to UC phase will not receive less in Universal Credit at the outset than they would have in the previous legacy benefits - assuming their circumstances remain the same.

However, it is not appropriate to compare those who may move onto UC through Move to UC (with no change of circumstances) and those who move onto UC because of an event that triggers a new benefit claim. Where there is a change of circumstances, different amounts of benefit may be payable. Therefore, there is no 'correct' amount that can be calculated for transitional payments in comparison to what might be payable by way of transitional protection under Move to UC.

There are however additional payments of two weeks of Housing Benefit, known as a "run-on" which are already available to people moving to UC. Remaining people moving to UC under the Move to UC process will be eligible to receive a two-week Transitional Payment, in line with those who migrate to UC because of a change of circumstances.

There will also be a two-week "run on" for people in receipt of income-based Jobseekers Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance or Income Support from 22 July 2020. The amount of these "run-ons" will be fixed according to the amount of the award payable immediately before claiming UC.

My Department is also currently making transitional payments to those who lost the Severe Disability Premium after moving from legacy benefits to UC.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Communities how much funding has been set aside by her Department and its arm's-length bodies to celebrate the Northern Ireland Centenary.

**(AQW 18108/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The following bodies, part or fully funded by DfC, have set aside funding to mark the centenary:

- Libraries NI has set aside £10k, provided by the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Shared History Fund, to deliver the project, 'Stormont Remembered in Libraries NI resources.'
- National Museums NI has set aside £145k for its exhibition, 'Collecting the Past, Making the Future.'
- The Ulster-Scots Agency has set aside up to £170k for its programme to mark the centenary.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Communities for the latest data held by her Department on citizens (i) who list as a first language; or (ii) report fluency in (a) Irish; (b) Polish; (c) Lithuanian; (d) Mandarin or Cantonese; (e) Urdu; and (f) Arabic.

**(AQW 18157/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Department for Communities does not hold the information required to answer the Member's question.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities what action she is progressing to change mobile library vehicles to alternative fuels such as hydrogen or electric; and when this will be completed.

**(AQW 18234/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** As part of an overall approach to managing the environmental impacts of its operations Libraries NI is developing a vehicle replacement programme which will seek to introduce alternative fuel vehicles to its fleet. The initial focus of this programme will be a phased replacement of the 38 light commercial vehicles which make up the majority of the current vehicle fleet of 55 vehicles in total.

A study is being undertaken to evaluate alternative technologies, the supporting infrastructure currently available and the feasibility of replacing the larger, heavy commercial vehicles used as mobile libraries with vehicles operating on alternative fuel sources.

It is anticipated this study will be complete by mid-2021 and the findings will inform future approaches to mobile library vehicle replacement.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the homelessness strategy, including a publication date.

**(AQW 18235/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive is currently developing a draft Homelessness Strategy for 2022-27 with a view to engaging in a public consultation during Quarter 4 of 2021. The new Homelessness Strategy will be published in April 2022.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities how objective need is used to allocate homes to applicants; and how her Department is achieving the Executive's commitment to building a shared society rather than single identity districts.

**(AQW 18237/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I am committed to ensuring an effective and fair housing allocations system. This is fundamental to easing housing stress and making sure allocations to social housing are based on objective housing need. The Selection Scheme awards points based on personal, housing and social circumstances. There are four categories: intimidation, insecurity of tenure, housing conditions, and health and social care needs. The total points from all categories reflect the applicant's housing need.

I recently published a Consultation Outcome Report on the "Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations". It details the anticipated changes that will update the Housing Selection Scheme, ensuring a more accurate waiting list. The Housing Executive has been asked to take forward implementation of the agreed proposals as soon as the budget is confirmed.



**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities (i) how much of a grant the legacy Department for Social Development provided to the Northside Development Trust for the construction of the Northside Village Centre in Derry; (ii) when the payment was made; (iii) what rules were in place to ensure that the proceeds of any sale of the assets were either returned to government or used for prescribed public benefit; (iv) whether the assets have been sold; (v) when the assets were sold; (vi) the value of the proceeds sold; and (vii) how those proceeds were dispersed.

**(AQW 18269/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department does not hold records in relation to a grant that may have been provided to Northside Development Trust for the construction of the Northside Village Centre.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Communities whether she has any plans to introduce an alcohol minimum pricing policy.

**(AQW 18301/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I believe that the introduction of legislation for Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) for alcohol has the potential to be a key population-level health measure to address the harms related to alcohol consumption. I have therefore made a commitment to have a full consultation on MUP once our new substance use strategy is finalised.

This consultation on MUP will examine a range of possible options in respect of alcohol pricing, including consideration of the emerging evidence of the effectiveness of MUP following its implementation in Scotland and elsewhere. Any policy considerations arising from the consultation will be brought to the Executive in due course.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the total average number of hours worked per week by youth workers in each constituency in each of the past five years.

**(AQW 18306/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department is unable to provide this information due to the following reasons:

- The fragmented nature of groups that utilise both paid or voluntary youth workers;
- The large number of independent groups that would hold this information locally, gathered in a variety of methods and detail;
- That volunteer unpaid youth workers are unlikely to hold accurate or indeed any records of hours worked as might be expected of paid employees;
- That paid youth workers would have a fixed contract with their employer however may work above those hours but are unlikely to be recorded, and;
- The extended length of period the information is sought.

**Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Communities what funding mechanisms are available for GAA clubs to develop their grounds.

**(AQW 18310/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The ongoing consultation on a new strategy for Sport and Physical Activity highlights six key themes, including the provision of inclusive and shared spaces and places. 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.

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 and development of sporting facilities.

The Department and Sport NI will continue to work with other Departments, Councils, Governing Bodies and clubs, including GAA clubs, to ensure that quality sports facilities are available to meet the needs of local communities.

GAA clubs should continue to monitor the Sport NI website to identify any suitable capital programmes which may become available in the future.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for Communities whether permission was sought from the Housing Executive for the placement of a large Sinn Féin banner on Divis Tower; and whether the rooftop access security on Divis Tower will be reviewed.

**(AQW 18317/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive have advised that its permission was not sought in relation to the recent banner on Divis Tower

The Housing Executive has informed my department that it has initiated an immediate review and will take appropriate action in line with its internal policies and procedures.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Communities when libraries will reopen for browsing.

**(AQW 18325/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** As part of the Executive's Pathway to Recovery roadmap, the Culture, Heritage and Entertainment pathway proposes limited in-library services, such as browsing, will be permitted from Phase 3, currently with an indicative date of 24 May 2021.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities to confirm (i) how many licensed premises, that have applied to change their publican licence to allow them to serve food and drink outside their property, have yet to receive a decision; and (ii) the average time taken for a licensing decision.

**(AQW 18357/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department is responsible for the policy and legislation regarding the retail sale and supply of alcoholic drinks, however the courts are responsible for issuing the licences. My Department is also responsible for the policy and legislation regarding the provision of pavement cafés, however district councils are responsible for issuing the licences. My Department therefore does not hold the requested information.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for Communities what consideration is being given to the resumption of spectator sports in line with COVID-19 restrictions.

**(AQW 18359/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** As this question is specific to sports I have been asked to respond.

I can confirm that since the restrictions on spectators were put in place Departmental officials have continued to meet fortnightly with representatives from the Governing Bodies, SportNI and the Sports Grounds Safety Authority to develop guidance to support a return of spectators.

That means that as soon as the Executive decides that some spectators can return to stadiums the advice and guidance will be in place to deliver safe environments that comply with the Health advice on for example social distancing, hygiene, testing, track and trace and face coverings.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities, given it is 19 years since the British government agreed to transfer the Fort George site to the Executive, why the Fort George site remains largely vacant and unused.

**(AQW 18452/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Although my Department purchased the site in 2004 there have been many barriers to its redevelopment including decontamination, the surrounding road infrastructure and, more recently, planning issues around the Creggan Reservoir. Remediation work completed in April 2019 and I recently agreed to dispose of part of the site for the Cityside Health and Care centre. I am committed to addressing the remaining barriers, in partnership with the Department for Infrastructure, to ensure the full potential of the site is realised.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Communities to outline her plans to address social isolation, including through social inclusion strategies, when COVID-19 regulations permit.

**(AQO 1991/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department will be supporting the safe return of a wide range of community services and activities that will allow people to reconnect and reduce the social isolation felt during the pandemic.

Funding provided by my Department to local councils under the Community Support Programme will help deliver essential community services, and the volunteering infrastructure supported by my Department will enable the return of safe volunteering opportunities around sport, culture, heritage and community events.

Under the People and Place Strategy, my Department will continue to support projects which target social isolation. This includes projects such as Good Morning Services for the elderly and isolated people to help reduce feelings of fear, isolation and loneliness and other projects which target women and vulnerable children who may also be at risk of social isolation.

Whilst social isolation and social inclusion are two separate but related issues, the co-design process for developing the social inclusion strategies will provide a platform for consideration of social isolation experienced by their target groups which include people who can be particularly vulnerable to, and affected by, social isolation.

The social inclusion strategies being led by my Department include the new Anti-Poverty; Disability; Gender; and Sexual Orientation Strategies which are currently in development, as well as the existing Active Ageing and Child Poverty Strategies.

It is proposed that the Executive's actions to promote social inclusion will be contained within the strategies.

Work to develop the strategies is continuing at pace, with a public consultation scheduled for later in the year.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the JobStart scheme.

**(AQO 2003/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Applications for funding for the JobStart Scheme opened on 2 April 2021. Employers of all sizes, including those in the voluntary and community sector, can participate in the Scheme.

By 29 April over 230 employers had applied for funding to offer more than 680 opportunities. Applications have been received from all council areas.

The first job opportunities have been advertised on Jobcentre online and are available for Work Coaches to match interested young people with.

My officials are continuing to assess applications and carry out due diligence checks, to ensure that young people taking part in the JobStart Scheme will receive a quality job opportunity, along with the support they need to develop occupational and employability skills, that will help them achieve sustained employment in the future.

My officials continue to engage with organisations to inform them about the JobStart Scheme. These include sectoral bodies and individual organisations of varying sizes.

In addition a multi-channel (TV, Radio, Digital, Social media) advertising campaign will commence on Monday 10 May 2021. This will ensure that potential employers and young people are aware of the Scheme and know where to access information on the NI Direct and NI Business Info websites.

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Communities whether she has considered establishing a mortgage rescue scheme.  
**(AQO 2002/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department previously considered establishing a mortgage rescue scheme in 2016. However given the low interest rates and market forecasts at that time, it was concluded that a mortgage rescue scheme should not be pursued.

The economic impact of the COVID pandemic has refocused attention on this area. My officials are closely monitoring the position of borrowers and have commissioned research by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. Their initial findings are expected later this month.

This research will help inform my decision on the best way to support home owners in the future. My Department continues to provide funding to Housing Rights who provide free advice on a range of housing issues including mortgage debt related queries.

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the co-design process for a new strategy for culture, arts and heritage.  
**(AQO 2001/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The culture, arts and heritage sectors have played a critical role throughout the pandemic, helping people to stay connected to the things that mattered to them and supporting their wellbeing during really difficult times.

These sectors have been among those hardest hit by the pandemic.

The development of a Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy is a key element in working towards the revival and revitalisation of these sectors.

While the focus for the past few months has rightly been on the delivery of the £38m Covid-19 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Support Programme, it will be important that we now focus on recovery and the future of these important sectors.

This work will be taken forward through co-design with the sectors and in the light of the work of the Culture Recovery Taskforce which I expect to establish shortly and which itself will be an exercise in collaboration and co-delivery.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the measures her Department is taking to increase social housing provision.  
**(AQO 2000/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Housing stress levels here are totally unacceptable. Our housing system is in need of transformative change. I have set out the direction of how we will achieve this through the biggest shake up of our housing system in over 50 years. A radical housing transformation plan was outlined toward the end of last year and the Department and key stakeholders are currently progressing this.

This includes working on initiatives to ring-fence funding for housing in areas of acute need, increase land supply, and the acquisition/refurbishment of existing properties, to enable the delivery of more social housing.

I can confirm that 2,403 new social homes were started in 2020/21 – almost 30% more than the target for the year (1,850 units). During the same period, 1,318 social homes were completed (against a target of 1,200). Each one of those houses represents a home for those who are on our social housing waiting list, many of whom will have been waiting for some time.

I have recently approved the new 3 year Social Housing Development Programme 2021/22 – 2023/24 which will shortly be published to the Housing Executive website. This will give the necessary assurances required by Housing Associations to enable them to progress schemes through design and planning stages.

I am committed to ensuring more social homes are built and allocated where they are needed and I am pleased to have delivered on a 'New Decade New Approach' commitment to enhance the level of investment in new social housing, with £162m being made available for 2021/22 – an increase of c£26m from 2020/21.

Equality and rights are the basis of my approach. Housing, and having a place to call home, is a fundamental right. I am committed to delivering a housing system that ensures those rights for everyone across society.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Communities whether she has given further consideration to increasing Carer's Allowance.

**(AQO 1999/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I recognise and respect the vital role that carers play. The rate of Carer's Allowance was increased to £67.60 a week from April 2021 as part of the annual benefits up-rating exercise.

Carers on low incomes can access additional financial support from my Department through income-related benefits and their associated carer premiums and additions.

In addition those in receipt of Carer's Allowance may, depending on their circumstances, also be eligible to access a range of other emergency financial support that my Department is providing during the COVID-19 crisis including Discretionary Support.

In terms of providing longer term additional financial support for unpaid carers here, it is anticipated that this will be considered as part of the upcoming welfare mitigations review.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Communities to outline her powers regarding local government oversight.

**(AQO 1998/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department has the following powers of last resort, provided in the Local Government Act (NI) 2014, regarding local government oversight:

Section 104 - My Department (or any Department) may direct a council to make a report or return or supply specific information with respect to the exercise of the council's functions.

Section 105 - My Department (or any Department) may cause a local inquiry to be held along with such investigations it sees fit in connection with the administration of any statutory provision relating to the functions of a council or its committees and sub-committees

Section 106 - My Department (or any Department) may, after an inquiry or investigation has been completed and the Department is satisfied that the council has failed to discharge any of its functions, may make an order that the council is in default and direct a council to take action, within a specified period.

## Department of Education

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education whether the Education Authority Literacy Support Service (i) is adequately resourced; and (ii) has the capacity to deliver the support to which children with special educational needs in Northern Ireland are entitled.

**(AQW 17862/17-22)**

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** Literacy difficulties in Northern Ireland are a high incidence Special Educational Need (SEN) with the Education Authority (EA) Literacy Service the largest within the family of its Pupil Support Services.

The EA has advised that the Literacy Service expenditure for 2021-22 is projected at £7.1 Million. The Service employs just under 120 FTE (full-time equivalent) teaching staff including 1 Head of Service; 3 Deputy Heads of Service and a Senior Teacher team. Non-teaching staff in the service currently includes 1 FTE Digital Content Co-ordinator and 5.2 FTE administrative staff.

Since 2018, the EA advise that the Literacy Service has managed 5,607 referrals from the EA Educational Psychology Service. The service is in high demand and referral rates currently exceed service delivery capacity.

The EA will be considering all issues pertaining to literacy difficulties within the multi-disciplinary Support Services strand of the current Special Educational Needs and Disability Strategic Development Programme.

**Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Education (i) whether the announcement that bands can rehearse outdoors from 23 April 2021 also applies to schools; and (ii) whether such rehearsals can take place as an after-school activity in line with the changes to allow extra-curricular/after-school sport, etc.

**(AQW 18050/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** I can advise that the Education Authority's Music Unlocked guidance, as of 12 May, has been revised to reference that the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (NI) 2020 now permit outdoor band rehearsals (a group of two or more persons, along with a conductor or instructor) and therefore orchestra, band and ensemble rehearsals in schools are now permitted to resume outdoors.

This is permitted provided that the band does not engage in a procession, each person in the band has an instrument, the rehearsal gathering only consists of the band and any conductor/instructor, that an appropriate risk assessment is undertaken and that all reasonable measures are taken to limit the risk of virus transmission. The regulations also state that no singing is permitted as part of an outdoor band rehearsal.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Education following a procurement process, whether his Department has received funding from the Department of Finance for the provision of laptops for teachers .  
(AQW 18088/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** A business case for provision of laptops for teachers is currently being prepared by the Education Authority for submission to DE. A procurement exercise has not been completed and would not be possible until the business case has been approved by DE and DoF, and funding subsequently confirmed.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education (i) whether mental health and student wellbeing remains a priority for his Department as society emerges from the pandemic; and (ii) how he will communicate that priority to school principals.  
(AQW 18132/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Emotional health and wellbeing continues to be a high priority for the Department of Education (DE), particularly as we have yet to see the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

DE has been working collaboratively with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency (PHA), the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), the Education Authority (EA) and other Government Departments to develop a Framework for Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education, which has recently been published, alongside an Implementation Plan, and is available at the following link: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/emotional-health-and-wellbeing>.

The main emphasis of the Framework is to support schools to promote emotional health and wellbeing at a universal level, through a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach, and providing early and enhanced support for those children and young people who may be at risk or showing signs of needing further help.

Some of the programmes of support have already commenced:

- The Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCT) Text A Nurse service;
- The EA Youth Service REACH programme (Resilience Education Assisting Change to Happen), and
- The development of the CCEA Wellbeing Hub.

Work is progressing to approve and commence other support programmes including the enhancement of the HSCT Regional Integrated Support for Education (RISE) Team for Key Stage 2 pupils which has a focus on universal support and group work within primary schools; a new Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) Emotional Wellbeing Teams in Schools Service, and enhanced EA Wellbeing Services.

The Framework Implementation Plan is a "live document" and school principals will be kept informed as and when the programmes commence. Each programme will be closely monitored and evaluated to ensure it is meeting need, and if not then we will look at other ways to address issues of concerns, in consultation with stakeholders, including schools and children and young people.

The EA has put the emotional health and wellbeing of our young people at the forefront of the response to young people through the pandemic, and as restrictions lift and routines change. It will continue to prioritise the wellbeing of young people in the re-engagement with onsite learning through a range of identified initiatives which include:

- The Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS).
- Critical Incident Response Team.
- A range of training resources including Bereavement and Loss, Promoting Positive Mental Health, Trauma Informed Practice Training, Physical Health and its links to mental health training.
- Partnership with Reverse the Trend Organisation.
- The Daily Mile promotion with schools.
- A Wellbeing Portal with a range of resources for staff, young people and parents/carers accessible on the EA website – <https://www.eani.org.uk/educational-support-services>.
- Advice and guidance of key Children and Young People's Services including Education Welfare Service and Education Psychology Service.
- The High Five Newsletter for Primary settings and young people published every two weeks with a focus on the "Take 5" model; and
- A range of resources from the Behaviour Support Services on reconnection and wellbeing for staff, young people and parents.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the finding of the Secondary Students Union of Northern Ireland mental health survey that only 34% of school pupils believed that their schools had addressed mental health when schools reopened in September 2020.

**(AQW 18133/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** I welcome the findings of the Secondary Student's Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI) survey and will seek to address the issues raised to ensure a better experience for young people.

The emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people continues to be a high priority for the Department of Education (DE). I appreciate that the Covid-19 crisis has created a different dimension to mental health and emotional wellbeing, therefore as part of the Education Restart Programme DE has worked collaboratively with the Education Authority (EA) to consider how best we could ensure that all children and young people were supported when they returned to school for the new academic year.

In support of this, £5m was made available in 2020/21 directly to all schools (nursery, primary, post primary, special), as well as EOTAS and Youth Settings to help address wellbeing pressures. A further £5m has been made available for 2021/22, which is subject to the necessary approval processes.

The EA made available a range of additional services to support emotional health and wellbeing, including a suite of on-line resources for school leaders and staff, children and young people, and their parents/carers. This was supplemented by other support including webinars for schools on trauma sensitive practice and a Wellbeing Helpline facilitated by the Education Psychology Service.

We strive to provide the best possible service within the resources available, and listen carefully to feedback received. I am aware that Dr Mark Browne, Permanent Secretary met with the SSUNI on 30 March 2021 in relation to the findings in their report and these have been conveyed to the EA. The EA has advised it intends to arrange to meet with SSUNI to discuss the issues raised, particularly in relation to the delivery of counselling services.

Finally, I can advise that further supports will be made available during the summer term and into the 2021-2022 academic year and my department will continue to engage with relevant stakeholders in relation to the Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework, which was launched alongside an Implementation Plan on 26 February 2021. Both documents can be accessed at the following link:- <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/emotional-health-and-wellbeing>.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education (i) for his assessment of the finding in the Secondary Students Union of Northern Ireland mental health survey that 173 pupils who had used their school's counselling service rated it at only one out of ten; and (ii) what action his Department has taken in response to that finding.

**(AQW 18134/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** I welcome the findings of the Secondary Student's Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI) survey and will seek to address the issues raised to ensure a better experience for young people.

The emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people continues to be a high priority for the Department of Education (DE). I appreciate that the Covid-19 crisis has created a different dimension to mental health and emotional wellbeing, therefore as part of the Education Restart Programme DE has worked collaboratively with the Education Authority (EA) to consider how best we could ensure that all children and young people were supported when they returned to school for the new academic year.

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**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education (i) for his assessment of the finding in the Secondary Students Union of Northern Ireland mental health survey that 84% of school pupils found examination uncertainty had placed a strain on their

mental health and (ii) in light of this finding, for his assessment of whether the mental health support provided before the pandemic remains suitable.

**(AQW 18135/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** I welcome the findings of the Secondary Student's Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI) survey and will seek to address the issues raised to ensure a better experience for young people.

The emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people continues to be a high priority for the Department of Education (DE). I appreciate that the Covid-19 crisis has created a different dimension to mental health and emotional wellbeing, therefore as part of the Education Restart Programme DE has worked collaboratively with the Education Authority (EA) to consider how best we could ensure that all children and young people were supported when they returned to school for the new academic year.

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**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Education to detail why Year 11 pupils will not have the opportunity to complete GCSE examinations this year.

**(AQW 18154/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Decisions about awarding CCEA qualifications through the alternative arrangements in place for 2021 were taken on the basis of the necessity of the award to facilitate progression.

Students in Year 12 and above need to be awarded their qualifications in order to progress to the next stage of their education or into training or employment. Students in Year 11 and below do not need to cash-in qualifications to progress to studies in Year 12 and will therefore have the opportunity to complete their studies in the next academic year, hopefully without further disruption.

There are two exceptions where Year 11 students will be permitted to enter for and be awarded CCEA GCSE qualifications this year, as these qualifications are required to facilitate progression to extended education opportunities in Key Stage 4. These are:

- CCEA GCSE Mathematics where the student will be entered for CCEA GCSE Further Maths in 2022 - CCEA GCSE Mathematics is a pre-requisite for CCEA GCSE Further Maths; and
- Early entries for CCEA GCSE Irish in Irish-medium schools and units or where the learner intends extending their learning through CCEA GCSE Gaeilge.

While a number of candidates in Year 11 and below enter for a range of GCSE qualifications each year, my decision was based on an assessment of whether or not those qualifications were essential for progression to further study at the same level next year.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps being taken to accommodate pupils who wish to pay to sit GCSE exams in spite of not having reached the standard age.

**(AQW 18155/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** General Certificate of Secondary Education qualifications are designed to support the statutory Key Stage four curriculum and assess a pupil's knowledge and skills at the end of this stage of education.

Decisions about awarding CCEA GCSE qualifications through the alternative arrangements in place for 2021 were taken on educational grounds. My priority was to facilitate awarding of qualifications where these are required by pupils to facilitate progression. With two specific exceptions as set out in AQW 18154/17-22, students in Year 11 and below do not need to cash-in qualifications to progress to studies in Year 12.

**Ms Mullan** asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the new Ardnashee school capital project in Derry, including the status of and timeframe for the project.

**(AQW 18194/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** I am pleased to report good progress on the new Ardnashee School and College project. The project secured planning approval from the Derry and Strabane District Council on 5 May 2021, which is a significant milestone. My officials and the Department's professional advisors, are currently reviewing the Education Authority's RIBA Stage 4 (Technical Design and Pre-Tender) submission, which we hope to finalise in the coming weeks.

The procurement process has commenced, with the pre-qualification stage almost complete and following approval of the RIBA Stage 4, the project will progress to Tender Stage. It is currently anticipated that work on site should commence in the autumn 2021.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education to outline how many primary one places are available per school, across North Down, for the next school term.

**(AQW 18211/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Details of the number of primary one places available at the commencement of the September 2021 school admissions process per school in North Down, and the number of places remaining as at 27 April 2021, are detailed in the table below.

DE Ref	School	Approved admission number	Total places offered	Spaces available as at 27 April 2021
401-1650	Ballyholme PS	90	89	1
401-6430	Ballymagee PS	58	58	0
401-1265	Ballyvester PS	16	15	1
405-1680	Bangor Central Integrated PS	88	71	17
401-3023	Bloomfield PS	58	58	0
401-1670	Clandeboyne PS	58	26	32
401-1645	Crawfordsburn PS	30	30	0
401-1654	Donaghadee PS	60	53	7
405-3020	Glenraig Integrated PS	30	30	0
401-3045	Grange Park PS	57	60	0
401-1631	Hollywood PS	75	56	19
401-6002	Kilcooley PS	29	20	9
401-6192	Kilmaine PS	87	87	0
401-1681	Millisle PS	30	28	2
401-6067	Rathmore PS	87	65	22
403-3008	St Anne's PS (Donaghadee)	11	2	9
403-6146	St Comgall's PS (Bangor)	41	45	0
403-6148	St Malachy's PS (Bangor)	60	45	15
403-1628	St Patrick's PS (Hollywood)	45	49	0
401-6111	Towerview PS	58	56	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>1071</b>	<b>943</b>	<b>136</b>

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Education to detail what support measures that will be introduced to deal with the increase in anxiety of school pupils who have been impacted by the wearing of face masks.

**(AQW 18221/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** In February 2021, the Department of Education published the Children & Young People's EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING in Education Framework ([https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Children %26 Young People s Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework %28final version%29.PDF](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Children%26YoungPeople'sEmotionalHealthandWellbeinginEducationFramework%28finalversion%29.PDF)). The framework is in place to support schools in dealing with the health and well-being of pupils on a range of matters.



As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, we are faced with new challenges across society. The Framework identifies a number of areas to provide the necessary support in dealing with emerging anxieties that pupils may experience as a result of the restrictions that have been put in place to curb the transmission of COVID-19.

The Department of Education currently provides funding for an Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) for pupils in post-primary schools, and post-primary age pupils attending Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) provisions and special schools.

Counselling can help pupils when they are facing difficulties that are impacting on their emotional health and well-being and may need additional support beyond the normal pastoral care offered by school staff. It can help to give them new ways of coping with issues that cause them distress or upset, including feelings of anxiety.

ICSS is not available for primary school children, although it is one of a range of supports to be delivered through implementation of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework, subject to securing the necessary resources.

My Department continues to work with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, the Health and Social Care Board, the Education Authority and other Government Departments to ensure that the emotional health and well-being of children and young people continues to be a high priority.

**Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how much is spent on school food annually; (ii) how school food is produced, including its source; (iii) where and by who is it produced; and (iv) how school food waste is managed.  
**(AQW 18245/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Department does not hold this information. The Education Authority (EA) has provided the following information in relation to schools where school meals are delivered by the EA. This includes grant-maintained integrated (GMI) schools and voluntary schools (VG) schools who use the EA Catering Service. Not all GMI or VG Schools use the EA Catering service, opting for an in house or subcontracted option.

- i The annual spend on food to produce meals to schools delivered by the Education Authority is the £15,827,000 for year 2019 / 2020.
- ii. School meals are produced on site and transported to those schools that do not have a production kitchen. Food products used in the production of school meals are sourced via the EA Procurement service using a local supplier base for distribution.
- iii. School meals catering staff prepare the food products on site at each school with a school meals production kitchen. Schools that do not have a production kitchen will have meals transported in from a production kitchen and will have been prepared by the staff employed at EA Catering.
- iv. School food waste is managed through a waste collection business appointed by EA Procurement.

**Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the current provision of Special Educational Needs funding for primary schools.  
**(AQW 18257/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The delivery of special educational needs (SEN) services is very challenging, with the number of children presenting with SEN increasing year on year, and some schools have highlighted the difficulties faced in managing this growth within existing resources.

Mainstream schools are responsible for meeting any additional needs of pupils within the first three stages of the SEN Code of Practice from their delegated budgets. A range of pupil support services is also provided by the Education Authority (EA) at Stage 3. Funding for children with a statement in mainstream school settings is covered within the EA's block grant.

As part of the work to address the recommendations in the 2017 NIAO SEN report, the Department is reviewing all current funding arrangements for SEN in mainstream schools (including Learning Support Centres).

The Department has also accepted recommendation 2 of the 2021 Public Accounts Committee report, "Impact Review of Special Educational Needs", and will be commencing an independent, external review of the SEN service, provision and processes. This review will include consideration of the funding of SEN services, including the delegation of budgets to schools.

In preparation for the implementation and statutory effect of the new SEN Framework, additional funding of £7.5m in Quarter 4 of 2020-21 and £22m in 2021-22 will help in ensuring that every school has a Learning Support Co-ordinator and a Personal Learning Plan (PLP) is completed for each child on a school's SEN Register.

**Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Education to detail the financial package being presented to schools for minor repair works and exterior paint works.  
**(AQW 18261/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** £46.2m capital resources have been allocated to progress minor works schemes across the Schools' estate during the 2021/22 financial year.

The Education Facilities Management Service have a planned external decoration programme for the 2021/22 delivery year, this is subject to recurrent funding being available.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Education how much public funding was provided to build the Irish language school, Scoil an Droichid, in South Belfast.

**(AQW 18326/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Approximately £934k was provided for accommodation, land and equipment for Scoil an Droichid since it was established on its current Cooke Street site in 1996. Funding has been in the form of EU grants, Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (InaG) funding and Departmental allocations to the Education Authority.

A major capital project was announced in June 2014 to provide a new seven class school and nursery for the school. The preferred site for the new school is the former Education Authority (EA) owned Ulidia Resource Centre. To date £221k has been allocated to the EA to demolish the building and clear the site. A further £252k has been incurred in design consultant fees, EA and CPD fees and planning.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Education (i) how much public funding has been provided to rent the premises used by the Irish language school, Scoil an Droichid, in South Belfast; (ii) to whom has that funding been paid; and (iii) on what basis was it established that the ownership of the site was different from the controlling interests in the school.

**(AQW 18327/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Between the financial years 2007/08 and 2011/12 £276,621 was paid to An Droichid Ltd, in respect of a rental charge for the site at Cooke Street, Belfast. No rent has been paid for the site since then.

I am unable to provide details in response to the third part of your question as there is a dispute over the ownership of the site, or parts of it and no comment can be made as the matter is presently before the Courts.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Education to detail the enrolment figures for St Colm's High School for the last five years.

**(AQW 18365/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The information requested is contained in the table below.

Year	Total enrolment
2016/17	392
2017/18	386
2018/19	430
2019/20	482
2020/21	536

**Source:** NI school census

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education to detail his plans to narrow the educational gap between pupils entitled to free school meals and pupils not entitled to free school meals.

**(AQW 18382/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Raising educational attainment whilst closing the educational gap between FSME and non-FSME pupils has been a Departmental priority for many years. This dual challenge is one which many countries endeavour to overcome and we are not alone in that regard. We have made steady progress over the past 5 years or more as demonstrated in increasing performance at level 2 (GCSEs and equivalent) and level 3 (A levels and equivalent) and in international studies such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS.

In 2018/19, the percentage of FSME school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A\* - C or equivalent including English and maths was 49.5%, while the percentage of non-FSME school leavers achieving the same measure was 78.5%. This represents a gap of 29 percentage points between these two groups. However, this gap appears to be narrowing; in 2014/15, there was a gap of 32.4 percentage points between these groups. In the last 5 years the proportion of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs A\*-C or equivalent including GCSE English and Maths has risen by over 7 percentage points (up from 63.5% in 2014 to 70.8% in 2019). At over 14 percentage points, the improvement for school leavers in receipt of free school meals has been even more marked (49.5% in 2019, compared with 34.9% in 2014).

The outcomes achieved in international studies point to our children and young people more than holding their own, both in comparison with our nearest neighbours and on an international basis. The attainment of pupils entitled to Free School Meals has continued to improve and evidence from PISA 2018 points to the strong outcomes achieved by our most deprived pupils. However, more needs to be done to support children and young people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds.

That is why I commissioned an Expert Panel in September 2020 to examine and propose an action plan to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background, including the long-standing issues

facing working-class, Protestant boys. This was a New Decade New Approach commitment. I have recently received the Final Report and Action Plan which I am considering. In due course it will be submitted to the NI Executive for its consideration. I am very hopeful that the actions within the plan will make a significant contribution towards improving the educational outcomes for all pupils and particularly those children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education to confirm (i) what oversight his Department provides to monitor the effectiveness of Boards of Governors; and (ii) what action is taken if a Board of Governors of a controlled school have not met regularly and do not engage with parents.

**(AQW 18398/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Department does not have an official monitoring role on the effectiveness of Boards of Governors. However, the Education Training Inspectorate may evaluate the quality of the strategic and corporate work of the Board of Governors during inspections and if they are concerned about the standards of governance within a school it can recommend that the Department exercises its powers under Article 14 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and appoint additional governors to the board of governors.

The Education Authority (EA), which appoints Governors to Controlled schools, has an extensive training programme available to all governors and along with the Department is able to provide advice and support to Boards as appropriate.

The past year has been extremely difficult for schools and in many cases, boards of governors planned meetings could not proceed due to Covid restrictions. The Department recently approved an amendment to the Scheme of Management for Controlled schools which made provision for governors to meet remotely. The EA issued guidance during the first lockdown to advise that Boards of Governors should not meet unless required to transact urgent business.

Outside of Covid restrictions, where it has come to the attention of EA that a Board of Governors has been unable to meet, the EA can provide support to help overcome the barrier to meeting. Where however in the opinion of an individual or group, the board have not met 'regularly' enough, that is a matter for the Board to consider.

If an individual or group is dissatisfied with the level of engagement provided by the Board of Governors, the school should have a process by which concerns may be raised. These may include informal process for providing suggestions and raising such matters. Alternatively, the school will have a complaints procedure available to parents, carers, and other stakeholders that should be used.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education to outline the process his Department will undertake to remove a governor of a controlled school if that governor is found to be abusing their position by bullying staff, not declaring conflicts of interest and wilfully disrupting both the operation of the board and staff team.

**(AQW 18399/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Any complaint about a governor should in the first instance be raised with the Board of Governors.

Responsibility for taking decisions on school based matters (including complaints) rests with the Board of Governors, unless there has been a failure on the part of the Board of Governors to comply with some requirement in education legislation. Investigating and responding to complaints about schools is the responsibility of each school's governing body.

If the complaints procedure becomes exhausted, there is a right to refer the matter to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. The Ombudsman will, however, will only consider a case once the school's internal complaints process has been fully exhausted.

The schools' Scheme of Management will have provision for the declaration of pecuniary interests by governors where they should disclose openly the nature of their interest as soon as practicable after the commencement of a meeting. They shall withdraw from the meeting during consideration or discussion of that matter and any vote on any question related to that matter.

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 noted in the Governor Guide. This notes that the primary purpose of the school governor, acting collectively as a member of the Board of Governors, is to ensure that the school is properly managed and delivers high quality education for all its pupils.

Apart from the school Principal or elected teacher governor, a governor ceases to be a board member if they: subsequently become an employee of any school for which the board of governors is appointed, is subsequently convicted of an offence and sentenced by a court or subsequently become bankrupt or the subject of a Bankruptcy Restrictions Order.

A member of the board shall be considered to have resigned their membership and shall cease to be a member where - there is an absence from three consecutive meetings, or for six months consecutively, whichever is the greater period, unless the failure to attend was occasioned by illness or other unavoidable cause.

**Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Education to outline how many supply teachers used in schools in the Upper Bann to cover temporary vacancies, are teachers that had previously taken retirement.

**(AQW 18401/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Teachers' Pay & Pensions Team has analysed the payroll system for temporary teachers in the academic year 1 Sept 2019 - 31 August 2020 and identified a total 55 teachers who have retired and worked in a temporary capacity in this year within the Upper Bann constituency area.

Please note the following:

- 1) Information does not include Voluntary Grammar Schools.
- 2) Teacher count is for any service carried out in the academic year 1 September 2019 - 31 August 2020 following retirement.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Education (i) to detail public spending per pupil on education in Northern Ireland; and (ii) for his assessment of how that compares to GB and the Republic of Ireland.

**(AQW 18412/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:**

- (i) The public spending per pupil on education in Northern Ireland is £6,287, based on the Department's opening budget for the 2021-22 financial year.

This figure includes funding for schools and pupils from both the Aggregated Schools Budget and the Education Authority's block grant, as well as the Education Authority's earmarked budgets for schools. It excludes funding for non-statutory pre-school education providers participating in the Pre-School Education Programme and opening COVID-19 funding commitments.

Details of the Department's 2021-22 Opening Resource Budget can be accessed via the link below:

Department of Education 2021-22 Opening Resource Budget ([https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Department of Education 2021-22 Opening Resource Budget\\_0.pdf](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Department%20of%20Education%202021-22%20Opening%20Resource%20Budget_0.pdf))

- (ii) There are inherent difficulties in trying to make comparisons on per pupil funding across the jurisdictions, examples of which include, but are not limited to, regional differences in school starting ages, how different types of schools are funded and how funds, including support services to pupils, are accounted for (e.g. home to school transport, school meals, etc.).

Numerous research studies have sought to provide relative budget/expenditure comparisons across jurisdictions, but for the most part these have necessarily been limited to high-level approximations, which contain numerous qualifications and/or annotations as to the comparability of data.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education what percentage of special school staff have been vaccinated as a result of the expansion of the vaccination programme.

**(AQW 18416/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Vaccination is a personal choice. The Department does not hold this information.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education to detail the primary school counselling pilot, including the number of primary schools included.

**(AQW 18417/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Department of Education (DE) recognises there is a need to address the increasingly complex issues facing our younger children.

A Primary School Counselling pilot, to include all primary schools (including special schools with a cohort of primary school pupils), is one of a range of supports to be delivered through the implementation of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework.

Although funding was approved during 2020/21 to support delivery of the Primary School Counselling pilot, the closure of schools due to lockdown made this undeliverable.

Work is progressing between DE officials and the Education Authority to prepare for the commencement of the pilot during 2021/22, subject to securing the necessary funding and approval processes, including the development of plans for evaluation of the impacts and benefits of this support for primary school children.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education to outline the rationale and evidence for his decision to not permit inter-schools sports at this time.

**(AQW 18418/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** My Department's guidance continues to be informed by advice from the Chief Medical Officer, the Assistant Chief Scientific Advisor, the Public Health Agency and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies which is based on scientific and public health advice. On 15 April, based on the Department of Health's advice, the Executive took the decision to permit the resumption of limited competitive outdoor sport from 23 April. However, it did not permit the resumption of inter-schools

sports at that point. My Department continues to engage with the Department of Health in order to allow the Executive to consider a resumption of all inter-school sports as soon as possible and when it is safe to do so.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Education whether he will introduce legislation to provide for a flexible school starting age.

**(AQW 18483/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** There are circumstances where it may be appropriate for children to delay starting school when they are due to, which is why I announced my decision to develop policy proposals to address the issue of flexibility in school starting age.

This is a key legislative priority for me in the current mandate and I have instructed my officials to work at pace scoping out the policy work for a potential Bill. At the same time I recognise that there will be significant pressure on the Executive's legislative programme and progress on any legislative changes may be impacted by other Executive and private members bills all vying for assembly time.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of times the Education Authority's Critical Incident Response Team has been called out to schools in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18491/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Education Authority has confirmed the Critical Incident Response Team has provided critical incident management advice, support and resources during the academic years (September to August) as follows:

Academic Year	Number of Critical Incidents
2018/19	67
2019/20	51
2020/to date	23

These figures include circumstances in which the Critical Incident Response Team did not physically attend school premises, but provided support and advice by telephone, when appropriate.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Education how his Department is progressing Irish Medium schools in West Tyrone.

**(AQW 18494/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** There are two Irish-medium primary schools in West Tyrone, namely Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh in Strabane and Gaelscoil na gCrann in Omagh. Both schools are sustainable and have nursery units offering 26 full-time places.

There are no key issues included in the Education Authority's Annual Action Plan 2019-2021 for Irish-medium provision in West Tyrone.

Gaelscoil na gCrann - was announced to proceed to design in June 2014 for a seven class Irish-medium primary school plus a single nursery unit. The school was handed over on 16 July 2020.

Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh – was announced to proceed to design in January 2013. Planning permission for the construction of a seven class base primary school plus a single nursery unit was granted in December 2020. It is estimated that construction on the project will commence in December 2021 with an estimated completion date of February 2023.

It is my intention to consider a further call for major capital works projects before the end of the 2021/22 financial year. Planning and preparation for that call will commence in the near future.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the managing authority for Irish-medium schools, will initially consider if any schools are in need of major capital funding and if so, will submit applications on behalf of the schools when a call for project applications is made by the Department.

Applications received will be assessed against criteria set out in a Protocol for selection, which is published in advance of a call being made.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education to outline how the funding model for incidental and in year school growth is an adequate and appropriate funding model for planned school growth.

**(AQW 18496/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Common Funding Scheme (CFS) sets the overarching framework within which schools are funded under the Common Funding Formula, and how they can, in certain circumstances, access central funds from the Education Authority (EA), as the funding authority for all grant-aided schools.

A link to the CFS (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/common-funding-scheme-2020-2021>) can be accessed on the Department's website.

The CFS makes provision for in-year growth through contingency funding, and recognises the impact on schools with an approved Development Proposal for growth. As a result, the qualifying threshold that applies to 'incidental growth' does not apply to new year groups in developing schools, nor to growth resulting from a Development Proposal.

A number of stakeholders have contacted my Department to outline concerns around the EA's application of contingency funding under the CFS, which includes in-year growth funding for schools with an approved Development Proposal. Finance officials in my Department and the EA have therefore been taking forward a project to review the EA's application of the CFS in relation to dual sites and contingency funding, which includes in-year growth. This work is ongoing, and it is anticipated that the outcome of the review will be known within the next few weeks.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Education for (i) an update on his Department's progress with regard to a flexible school starting age; and (ii) the timescale for the implementation of a new policy.

**(AQW 18524/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Since I announced my decision to develop policy proposals to address the issue of flexibility in school starting age, my officials have worked at pace scoping out the policy work for a potential Bill. The research and scoping phase of policy development has included engagement with a wide range of stakeholders and will provide a range of evidence based policy options for my consideration.

I would emphasise that this is a key legislative priority for me in the current mandate but, at the same time, I recognise that there will be significant pressure on the Executive's legislative programme. Progress on any legislative changes may be impacted by other Executive and private members bills all vying for assembly time but I will continue to press ahead with a view to bringing changes forward at the earliest opportunity.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) all requests for temporary variation in enrolment by post primary schools, including numbers for the 2021/2022 academic year; and (ii) the number of additional places granted, by school, for the 2021/2022 academic year.

**(AQW 18557/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Details of Temporary Variation (TV) requests received to date for admission to post-primary schools for the 2021/22 school year are set out in Table 1. As the post-primary admissions process is ongoing these figures are subject to change. I had already approved a number of additional places at Year 8 in advance of the post-primary process commencing and these are set out in Table 2.

**Table 1: Post-primary School Temporary Variation Admissions Requests for 2021/22 processed as at 12 May 2021**

School Ref	School Name	Admissions Number - Places Requested	Admissions Number - Places Approved	Revised Admissions Number
141-0270	Wellington College	22	1	111
142-0027	The Royal Belfast Academical Institution	12	0	
142-0029	St Dominic's GS	25	21	162
142-0030	St Malachy's College	25	14	184
221-0306	Lisneal College	20	20	198
223-0138	Dean Maguirc	32	32	112
223-0322	St Kevin's College	1	1	101
226-0283	Drumragh Integrated College	28	28	133
241-0048	Limavady GS	6	2	132
242-0052	Thornhill College	11	0	
242-0287	Lumen Christi College	24	0	
321-0035	Magherafelt HS	6	5	105
321-0133	Ballymoney HS	1	1	131
323-1032	St Colm's HS Draperstown	7	7	75
325-0207	Parkhall Integrated College	18	18	168
326-0289	Slemish College	10	10	150
326-0299	Ulidia IC	10	10	110

School Ref	School Name	Admissions Number - Places Requested	Admissions Number - Places Approved	Revised Admissions Number
341-0008	Ballyclare HS	6	1	187
341-0098	Carrickfergus GS	3	0	
342-0010	St Louis GS, Ballymena	29	6	145
342-0011	Ballymena Academy	18	17	193
342-0012	Dalriada School	7	7	132
342-0058	Rainey Endowed	12	12	112
342-0077	Belfast High School	10	2	138
421-0296	Bangor Academy	11	11	273
421-0051	Lisnagarvey HS	20	0	
423-0107	St Columbanus' College	5	5	135
426-0255	Lagan College	11	4	204
441-0085	Down HS	10	5	133
442-0051	Wallace HS	3	1	171
442-0086	Assumption GS	10	9	129
442-0088	St Patrick's GS, D'patrick	20	10	106
442-0259	Our Lady & St Patrick's College	22	22	212
521-0025	Newtownhamilton HS	4	4	39
521-0083	Markethill HS	7	0	
521-0097	Fivemiletown College	5	5	74
521-0127	Rathfriland HS	3	3	69
523-0135	St Mark's HS, Warrenpoint	21	21	171
523-0157	St Paul's HS, Bessbrook	14	8	253
523-0167	St Joseph's HS, Crossmaglen	9	9	129
523-0187	St Patrick's HS, Keady	9	2	162
523-0218	St Catherine's College	29	25	180
523-0321	St John the Baptist's College	4	4	104
526-0285	New-Bridge Integrated College	7	7	107
526-0286	Integrated College Dungannon	20	20	130
541-0013	Banbridge Academy	8	8	192
542-0073	St Joseph's GS, Donaghmore	49	31	151

**Table 2: Additional Year 8 places 2021/22**

School Ref	School Name	Parliamentary Constituency	Approved Admissions Number	Number of Additional Year 8 Places Allocated 2021	2021/22 Approved Admissions Number
1410079	Grosvenor Grammar	Belfast East	155	20	175
1210015	Ashfield Boys' High School	Belfast East	110	30	140
1420089	Strathearn College	Belfast East	110	10	120

School Ref	School Name	Parliamentary Constituency	Approved Admissions Number	Number of Additional Year 8 Places Allocated 2021	2021/22 Approved Admissions Number
4420259	Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock	Belfast East	180	10	190
<b>Total Belfast East</b>				<b>70</b>	
1420030	St Malachy's College Belfast	Belfast North	150	20	170
1420082	Dominican College	Belfast North	150	10	160
1230321	Blessed Trinity	Belfast North	195	10	205
<b>Total Belfast North</b>				<b>40</b>	
1420277	Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School	Belfast South	110	20	130
<b>Total Belfast South</b>				<b>20</b>	
5230293	St Patrick's College	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	100	22	122
5420304	St Patrick's Academy	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	193	15	208
<b>Total Fermanagh &amp; South Tyrone</b>				<b>37</b>	
3420080	St Mary's Grammar School	Mid Ulster - Magherafelt	153	12	165
3230168	St Pius X College	Mid Ulster - Magherafelt	140	30	170
<b>Total Mid Ulster - Magherafelt</b>				<b>42</b>	
3410209	Antrim Grammar School	South Antrim	112	24	136
<b>Total South Antrim</b>				<b>24</b>	
5420062	St Colman's College Newry	Newry & Armagh	125	15	140
5230157	St Paul's High School Bessbrook	Newry & Armagh	215	30	245
5420060	Our Lady's Grammar School	Newry & Armagh	120	28	148
<b>Total Newry &amp; Armagh</b>				<b>73</b>	
4210296	Bangor Academy	North Down - Bangor	242	20	262
4420015	Bangor Grammar School	North Down - Bangor	125	10	135
4230107	St Columbanus' College	North Down - Bangor	115	15	130
<b>Total North Down</b>				<b>45</b>	
4210063	Saintfield High School	Strangford	68	4	72
4210046	Glastry College	Strangford	110	6	116
<b>Total Strangford</b>				<b>10</b>	
<b>Total Additional places</b>				<b>361</b>	

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what action he is taking to ensure affordable uniform policies at all schools in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 18558/17-22)



**Mr Weir:** The wearing of school uniform is not governed by legislation but falls to schools to determine. The day-to-day management of schools, including school uniform policy, is a matter for school Principals, subject to any directions that might be given by the Board of Governors.

To assist schools in developing their school uniform policies, the Department of Education issued guidance. This guidance advises that schools should ensure that their school uniform policy is fair and reasonable, in practical and financial terms, and that schools should have regard to their duties under relevant equality and other legislation.

The guidance was revised in June 2018 and the Department wrote to all schools reminding them of the importance of keeping the costs of school uniforms to a minimum. The guidance advises schools to ensure that items are available 'off the peg' from a number of retail outlets so that the school uniform does not become a barrier for children from low income families attending the school

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201104-guidance-schools-school-uniform-policy-revised-5-june-2018>

I am aware of the recent Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Act 2021 which will require schools in England to follow new statutory guidance on uniform costs, instructing them to keep prices down. The Department will monitor the impact of the new law in England however, there are no plans at present to introduce legislation in relation to school uniform in NI.

I have recently agreed to a comprehensive review of the free school meal and uniform grant eligibility criteria with a view to implementation of recommendations in 2022 or 2023 subject to available resources. 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 review will consider the current rates of Uniform Grant as a contribution to the cost of school uniforms.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education whether he will introduce guidance or regulation to limit the requirement on pupils to purchase branded uniform.

**(AQW 18559/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The wearing of school uniform is not governed by legislation but falls to schools to determine. The day-to-day management of schools, including school uniform policy, is a matter for school Principals, subject to any directions that might be given by the Board of Governors.

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I have recently agreed to a comprehensive review of the free school meal and uniform grant eligibility criteria with a view to implementation of recommendations in 2022 or 2023 subject to available resources. 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 review will consider the current rates of Uniform Grant as a contribution to the cost of school uniforms.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Education whether his Department intends to relax guidance to schools on educational visits, outside of their premises, prior to the end of this term.

**(AQW 18621/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The most recent version of the Department of Education's Education Restart guidance, Coronavirus (COVID-19) Education Restart Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland 4th Edition ([https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Coronavirus Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings - March 2021.pdf](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Coronavirus%20Guidance%20for%20Schools%20and%20Educational%20Settings%20-%20March%202021.pdf)), was released at the start of March 2021. It provided an update on page 19 to say that schools could resume non-overnight domestic educational visits, provided that the school undertakes a full and thorough risk assessment, and that schools should consult with the existing health and safety guidance when considering educational visits. Visits can be done in line with protective measures, such as keeping children within their consistent group and the COVID-19 secure measures in place at the destination.

**Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Education when group based and home visiting will be allowed for Sure Start services.

**(AQW 18638/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Support provided by Sure Start to children and families facing disadvantage has never been so critical as during the COVID pandemic. As a positive first step, the Executive agreed my proposals for resumption of child only Sure Start services from 25 March; this support for children is in place.

However, it is important to also restart support for Sure Start parents and families who have been impacted by the pandemic, so that they in turn can support the development of their children. I have therefore submitted proposals to the Executive's COVID Taskforce, requesting urgent Executive consideration be given to restarting all remaining Sure Start services from 24 May.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education when singing lessons will be allowed in school for those pupils taking a music exam.

**(AQW 18657/17-22)**

**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 in 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. However, Music Service tutors who teach singing could 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 can 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.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education to outline when restrictions will be lifted on Sure Start premises and programmes.

**(AQW 18668/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Support provided by Sure Start to children and families facing disadvantage has never been so critical as during the COVID pandemic. As a positive first step, the Executive agreed my proposals for resumption of child only Sure Start services from 25 March; this support for children is in place.

However, it is important to also restart support for Sure Start parents and families who have been impacted by the pandemic, so that they in turn can support the development of their children. I have therefore submitted proposals to the Executive's COVID Taskforce, requesting urgent Executive consideration be given to restarting all remaining Sure Start services from 24 May.

**Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to increase physical activity and participation in sport in schools as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

**(AQO 2023/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** As restrictions have been gradually eased, I have sought to prioritise the core curriculum activities within schools. This has meant that pupils are now able to enjoy the majority of educational activities that would have been available before schools closed, provided that appropriate guidance is adhered to and mitigations are in place.

I am committed to supporting schools as they plan, develop and implement high quality PE provision and increase opportunities for physical activity right across the school day. Members will know that I secured an exemption for PE from the general prohibition in sport and provision has therefore continued.

In terms of wider sports provision, I wrote to schools on 14 April to advise that, in relation to the provision of extra-curricular school sports, regulations have been amended to permit the resumption of outdoor extra-curricular school sports. This will enable schools to increase participation in sports not normally included in the PE curriculum. It is essential that schools adhere to the guidance set by the relevant sports' governing body.

Indoor extra-curricular sports or inter-schools sports are not permitted at this time. This remains under review and any future easing of the regulations in respect of indoor sports will inevitably lead to greater participation.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to review The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 to develop further the provision of Relationship and Sexuality Education in schools.

**(AQO 2024/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** There are diverse views about the delivery, content and level of prescription of the RSE curriculum. 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.

Any changes to the legislation would require significant and extensive consultation with key stakeholders to allow for a sound evidence base on which to make decisions on content. It would also need to safeguard the current flexibility of the curriculum and ensure that it is not unintentionally narrowed or reduced.

However, you will be aware that funding has been provided to support the production of extensive RSE resources and guidance materials through the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment's online RSE Hub. Work on the Hub is ongoing.

**Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of pre-school admissions criteria.

**(AQO 2027/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Pre-school education, whilst non-compulsory, is an important phase of early education, and as such, my Department makes a funded pre-school education place available for every child in their pre-school year whose parents want it.

All admissions criteria are set by pre-school providers, taking into account guidance provided by the Department; however, current legislation requires that the top criterion for each provider prioritises children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

There have been many contextual changes in pre-school provision since this legislation was introduced in 1998, together with significant changes to welfare benefits, particularly the introduction of Universal Credit.

The introduction of Universal Credit alone necessitates a change to the current statutory criterion.

It was in this context, together with the many views expressed by parents and key stakeholders in recent years, that I recently launched a public consultation exercise to seek views on the continued need for the current legislative requirement and, if the criterion is to remain, consider which children should be prioritised.

This consultation will run until 16 July 2021 and I would encourage parents, carers and all early years stakeholders to respond with their views on the current legislative requirement and the proposals for changing it.

The consultation also seeks views on how the proposal to standardise the length of pre-school education sessions, which was set out in "Learning to Learn", the Framework for Early Years Education and Learning in 2013, might impact on views on the admissions process in the future. Responses to this aspect will help to inform future policy development in due course.

**Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Education whether he will intervene in the decision taken by the Education Authority to close the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School and bus the children to Portadown.

**(AQO 2028/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Development Proposal (DP) 574 was published by the Education Authority (EA) on 22 April 2021. This initiates a two month statutory objection period during which anyone can make their views known on the proposal, directly to the Department.

The DP process is a statutory process and I should point out that the EA is the proposer of the DP, but I will make the ultimate decision on the proposal, taking account of all pertinent evidence and views submitted.

As I am sure you will appreciate, as with all proposals, it is important to ensure that the statutory process is followed.

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education to outline what plans he has for a new controlled post-primary school building in Newtownards.

**(AQO 2029/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** It is a matter for the Education Authority (EA) working with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and other sectoral support bodies to bring forward proposals that meet the needs of children and young people. The EA, as Managing Authority for Controlled schools, would be responsible for bringing forward any Development Proposal (DP) specific to that sector.

My Department does not become engaged in Area Planning considerations until a DP is published by the EA.

To date nothing has been published in relation to any proposal regarding a new Post-Primary school in Newtownards, nor are there any workstreams in the EA's (extended) Annual Action Plan 2019-2021 with that intent.

**Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to develop further youth intervention programmes in the North West.

**(AQO 2030/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Youth work provision is driven by assessed need at both regional and local level. It would be for the relevant local advisory group(s) to agree what additional provision, if any, is required for EA to consider.

Drawing on existing assessed need, funding has already been allocated through the EA's new funding scheme for a two year period both at a regional and local area level. A full list of organisations who have been awarded funding is publically available on the EA Youth Funding website.

In addition to this, I have secured £5m for a summer youth programme that will incorporate a wide range of activities for young people across NI.

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Education what further engagement has he had with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment regarding the use of assessment tools to determine grades this year.

**(AQO 2031/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** My officials continue to meet with CCEA at least once a week to discuss all aspects of the alternative awarding arrangements, including seeking feedback from CCEA's regular meetings with post-primary principals on the ongoing implementation of those arrangements.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on his plans to extend school counselling provision to primary schools.

**(AQO 2032/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** A Primary School Counselling pilot is one of a range of supports for children and young people to be delivered through implementation of the Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework, which I launched jointly with the Minister for Health on 26 February 2021.

Subject to securing the necessary resources, the pilot will involve funding for primary school children (including those attending special schools) to have access to age appropriate counselling services when needed, and provide an evidence base to warrant consideration of a fully sustainable service.

Work is progressing between Department of Education officials and the Education Authority to prepare for the commencement of the pilot, subject to the necessary approval processes, including the development of plans for evaluation of the impacts and benefits of this support for primary school children.

**Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Education to outline an indicative timeframe for the full resumption of Sure Start services including group activities.

**(AQW 18819/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Support provided by Sure Start to children and families facing disadvantage has never been so critical as during the COVID pandemic. As a positive first step, the Executive agreed my proposals for resumption of child only Sure Start services from 25 March; this support for children is in place.

However, it is important to also restart support for Sure Start parents and families who have been impacted by the pandemic, so that they in turn can support the development of their children. I have therefore submitted proposals to the Executive's COVID Taskforce, requesting urgent Executive consideration be given to restarting all remaining Sure Start services from 24 May.

## Department of Finance

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 16399/17-22, to detail the cost to date for each of the approved schemes.

**(AQW 16889/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** The cost to date of Department of Health COVID-19 Schemes approved under Ministerial Direction are as follows:

Scheme	Cost to Date (£m)
Reimburse strike pay to healthcare workers for the period November 2019 to January 2020	1.4
£500 Bonus Scheme for health and social care staff	78.9
Special Recognition Payment to healthcare students	8.8
Additional Financial Support to DoH core grant-funded organisations in 2020/21	0.9
Air Ambulance NI	1.0
Grant Scheme to Support Carers	4.4
Grant Scheme to Support Cancer Services	10.7
Grant Scheme to Support Mental Health Services	10.7
Hospices	1.3
HSC Charitable Trust Funds	15.0

All amounts are draft pending completion of year end accounts.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Finance which Executive Departments, including arm's-length bodies and non-departmental public bodies, pay Corporation Tax.

**(AQW 17221/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The table below provides details of Executive Departments, including arm's-length bodies and non-departmental public bodies that pay Corporation Tax. We are still awaiting details from the Department for Economy and will issue separately when available.

Department	Name of body that pays Corporation Tax
Department of Justice	The Police Service of Northern Ireland
	Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust
	Probation Board for Northern Ireland
Department of Education	General Teaching Council for NI
	Middletown Centre for Autism Ltd
Department for Communities	NI Housing Executive
The Executive Office	Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation
	Strategic Investment Board Ltd
Department of Finance	None
Department for Infrastructure	NI Water
	NI Transport Holding Company (Translink)
	Belfast Harbour, Warrenpoint Harbour
	Londonderry Port
Department of Health	NI Fire and Rescue Services
DAERA	Agri-Food Biosciences Institute
	NI Fishery Harbour Authority
	Livestock Meat Commission
Department for the Economy	

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has to reduce business rates to help kick start the economy.  
**(AQW 18141/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** On 11 March I announced details of a rate relief package for the 2021-22 rating year which will deliver £230 million of support to almost 29,000 businesses here. The Rates (Coronavirus) (Emergency Relief) Regulations (NI) 2021 which came into operation on 7 May, provide for a further 12 month targeted business rate support, following updated expert and independent analysis of the local economy undertaken by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC). This relief will be applied on a very similar basis to the 12 month rate relief provided in 2020/21, which businesses have acknowledged was a lifeline during the pandemic, and which will also be critical now in recovery.

The Executive has agreed a freeze in the non-domestic Regional Rate at the same level set last year following an 18% reduction, and to further assist I have delayed the issuing of this year's bills until June. In addition, support for businesses will also continue to be provided through the range of other long-standing reliefs provided through the rating system, including Small Business Rate Relief and Rural ATM schemes, which I am in the process of extending for the 21-22 rating year. All of these measures will assist businesses as our economy make progress to recovery.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance to detail the 850 manufacturing and business organisations that will avail of the £21 million grant for COVID-19.

**(AQW 18161/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** To date 859 businesses have received the Manufacturing (Industrial Derating) Support Grant, totalling £20,695,000. 78 businesses received a payment of £15,000 and 781 received a payment of £25,000.

I am unable to detail the individual businesses which have, or will, receive payment of a Manufacturing (Industrial Derating) Support Grant, given sole trader data is personal data and releasing it would be contrary to the UK General Data Protection Regulation.

**Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Finance when maintenance work is scheduled to repair the light fixtures on Carson's statue on the Stormont Estate.

**(AQW 18167/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Following routine maintenance to clean the lighting fixtures on Carson's statue, it became apparent that the units were no longer fully operational. New replacement lighting fixtures have been ordered and will be installed as soon as possible.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 17497/17-22, how many requests there have been to his Department for translation services, broken down by language.

**(AQW 18184/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The Department of Finance facilitated the tender process for a translation services framework in October 2017. This framework operates on a self-service basis and any requests by individual Departments for translation will be made directly to one of the appointed contractors. Since April 2021, requests for translation to Irish or Ulster Scots are carried out through the Department for Communities Translation Hub.

My Department has made 50 requests for translation services since 2017. Details are provided below:

English To Irish	25	English To Italian	1
English To French	5	English To Lithuanian	1
English To Ulster Scots	4	English To Portuguese	1
English To German	4	English To Romanian	1
English To Simplified Chinese	4	English To Spanish	1
English To Polish	2	English To Bulgarian	1

**Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Finance whether the funding shortfalls from the EU will be replaced with new additional money to the Executive.

**(AQW 18189/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The position in terms of replacement funding varies across programmes.

Replacement farm funding from Treasury this financial year is around £14 million short of what I would deem to represent full replacement funding.

It is increasingly unlikely that the Executive will receive direct replacements for Structural Funds and a number of competitive funds. The Community Renewal Fund will be operated from Westminster, with funding bypassing the Executive and falling short of full replacement funding. The Shared Prosperity Fund is expected to replace the Community Renewal Fund and operate on a similar basis; although the detail, including its value, remains unclear.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will consider continuing Localised Restrictions Support Scheme payments to businesses that can only partially reopen under the latest regulations.

**(AQW 18203/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The legal authority that was given to my Department to provide financial assistance relates only to those businesses that were closed or severely restricted in the services that they can offer by the Health Protection Regulations. When business sectors come out of such restrictions, my Department can no longer provide payment under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS). Payment has already ceased for sectors such as close contact services, outdoor attractions, non-essential retail and self-contained tourist accommodation.

I welcome the reopening from 30 April of some premises within the hospitality sector for outdoor service and gyms for individual training as a positive step forward. However, I also recognise that the businesses within those sectors continue to be subject to severe restrictions on the nature of the services they can offer, with many unable to trade at all. Therefore, I agreed as an interim measure to continue paying LRSS to those particular sectors until at least 23 May due to the restrictions that continue to apply. I will continue to keep this matter under review.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance whether multi-use entertainment complexes are able to continue to avail of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme if some services within the complex are not permitted to reopen.

**(AQW 18204/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** In my response to the Member's Question [AQW 18203/17-22], I advised that certain business sectors that are subject to closure or severely restricted by the Regulations will continue to be paid until at least 23 May. A single business operating a multi-use entertainment complex will also continue to receive LRSS up until the date the complex is permitted to open by the Regulations, although not all services within the complex may be permitted to reopen. Any separate business

operating within such a complex that has properly been receiving LRSS and is not yet permitted to open, will continue to receive LRSS.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance when the 2021 Census results will be published.  
(AQW 18277/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** Initial results from the 2021 Census are planned to be published in Summer 2022.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Finance when the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme for business which will continue to operate with restrictions, such as gyms and hospitality, will end.  
(AQW 18299/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** The legal authority that was given to my Department to provide financial assistance relates only to those businesses that were closed or severely restricted in the services that they can offer, by the Health Protection Regulations. When business sectors come out of such restrictions, my Department can no longer provide payment under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS).

I welcome the reopening from 30 April of some premises within the hospitality sector for outdoor service and gyms for individual training as a positive step forward. However, I also recognise that the businesses within those sectors continue to be subject to severe restrictions on the nature of the services they can offer, with many unable to trade at all. Therefore, I agreed as an interim measure to continue paying LRSS to those particular sectors until at least 23 May due to the restrictions that continue to apply. I will continue to keep this matter under review.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance whether close-contact service businesses are included in the 100 per cent rates holiday for 2021/22.  
(AQW 18349/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** Rate relief in the 2021-22 rating year, will be provided on a very similar basis to that in 2020-21. Although the term close-contact service is not used in the legislation, retail and retail services such as barbers, hair salons, nail or beauty services, tattoo parlours and piercing parlours will benefit from the relief.

Details of all the businesses eligible for rate relief are listed in Schedule 2 of the legislation - The Rates (Coronavirus) (Emergency Relief) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2021/116/made/data.pdf>).

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 17760/17-22, (i) how many groups applied for financial support to the dormant accounts fund; (ii) how many groups that applied met the criteria; (iii) how the approved applicants were selected for funding out of the groups that met the criteria; and (iv) whether he was personally involved in the decision on which groups were selected.  
(AQW 18354/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** There were applications from 211 groups to the Dormant Accounts Fund between 12th January and 30th April 2021.

The National Lottery Community Fund is delivering this open, rolling programme. The Department does not hold details of applications to the Fund. However, National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) has advised that to date the success rate of applications has been relatively low.

The Fund is not a programme replacement Fund rather it is designed to meet the gaps that traditional funding models cannot address. Many of the applications sought replacement programme funding and did not meet the capacity building, resilience or sustainability aims of the Fund. The Department is working with National Lottery Community Fund to promote the overall purpose of the Fund and encourage new and resubmitted applications.

The NLCF is responsible for the administration of the Dormant Accounts Fund as set out in the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Act 2008. The Minister of Finance was not involved in the decision on which groups were selected.

More information on the programme can be obtained from The National Lottery Community Fund website:  
<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/dormant-accounts-ni>

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Finance, in a case where an applicant can show their Net Annual Value is close to £15,001 and that they can demonstrate they are a medium manufacturing business in terms of turnover and other measures, to detail the discretion he has on the authorisation of the £25,000 Manufacturing (Industrial Derating) Support Grant.  
(AQW 18489/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** Land & Property Services (LPS) must administer the Manufacturing (Industrial Derating) Support Grant support in accordance with the Regulations which give the Department the legal authority to make the grants. Those regulations do not give the Department any power to apply discretion on the eligibility criteria.

The Manufacturing (Industrial Derating) Support Grant provides support to businesses that occupied commercial premises with a Net Annual Value (NAV) between £15,001 and £51,000 who benefit from industrial derating as at 1 March 2021, subject

to scheme eligibility and in line with the associated Regulations. If the business's NAV is under £15,001 they are not eligible for the scheme as the NAV falls below the threshold.

LPS would also consider applications for this support grant from businesses that applied to have their NAV reassessed before the 1 March 2021. If a business made an application to LPS to have their NAV reassessed before 1 March 2021, they can contact LPS using the online form at Coronavirus: Large NAV Business Grant ([nibusinessinfo.co.uk](http://nibusinessinfo.co.uk)) and they will be advised of the next step. If a business has not applied to have their NAV reassessed before the 1 March 2021 there is no facility to request a review for the purpose of accessing this grant.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Finance what consideration he has given to permitting local Councils to redeem and refinance old government high interest loans without penalty.  
**(AQW 18515/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** It is appreciated that councils are repaying some historic loans at interest rates in excess of the current lending rate; as are other organisations, businesses and individuals.

However, historically, the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund (NICF) has borrowed from the National Loans Fund (NLF) in order to finance some of these loans. DoF charges interest on loans made to councils from the NICF in order to fund the interest payable on related borrowings from the NLF. Penalties charged for early redemption on the loans are set such that they will provide cover for the loss of interest over the remaining life of the loan.

Consequently, in order for local councils to redeem and refinance these loans without incurring redemption penalties, the costs would have to be absorbed by the NI Block, as the liability to repay the interest to the National Loans Fund would remain.

The potential cost to the NICF of absorbing the redemption fees would be equal and opposite to the savings made by the councils and would effectively become a subsidy to the councils at the expense of the wider block. This could also create a local precedent where other public bodies, such as schools and the Housing Executive, would seek to redeem loans without penalty, placing a further burden on the block.

Due to the potential substantial cost to the NI block as a whole, such a policy would need to be carefully considered in the first instance by Local Government Division in the Department for Communities (DfC), who have policy responsibility for local government.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance how many meetings he, or his officials, have held in the last 12 months with NIPSA in relation to civil service pay.  
**(AQW 18539/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** There have been 18 meetings held between myself or Department of Finance officials with unions since 1 May 2020 in relation to civil service pay. Eight of those meetings were with NIPSA.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the sites being considered in Omagh town for the new digital hub.  
**(AQW 18551/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Department of Finance officials are working to determine the optimal size and location for the Omagh Connect2 hub. Sites within Central Government's existing office portfolio in Omagh are being considered in the first instance.

My officials continue to liaise with the Chief Executive of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and her team to explore options to maximise the local regeneration and impact of the hub.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on payment of the £5,000 top up grant for businesses that had previously received the £10,000 Business Support Grant.  
**(AQW 18560/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** A further payment of £5,000 will be automatically issued to businesses that received the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant in 2020, were still in occupation of the premises on 1 March 2021 and have not been paid under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme or Covid Business Support Scheme Part B, subject to scheme eligibility in line with the associated Regulations.

These payments will be automatic. Business which received the initial £10,000 Small Business Support Grant do not need to apply. Businesses entitled to receive this grant will be informed by letter or email that a payment will be issued. It is anticipated that payments will begin to issue before the end of May 2021.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance to detail the total amount of unpaid rates in each of the last three years.  
**(AQW 18584/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The end of year rating debt for the years 2017/18 to 2019/20, the last three years for which figures are available, are provided in the table below. The 2020/21 financial accounts have not yet been finalised.



Rating Year	End of Year Rating Debt
2019/20	£124.4 million
2018/19	£124.5 million
2017/18	£125.8 million

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance how many requests his Department received for the translation of documents into (i) Irish; and (ii) Ulster Scots, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18629/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The Department of Finance facilitated the tender process for a translation services framework in October 2017. This framework operates on a self-service basis and any requests by individual Departments for translation will be made directly to one of the appointed contractors. Since April 2021, requests for translation to Irish or Ulster Scots are carried out through the Department for Communities Translation Hub.

Details of the requests by my Department over the last 3 years are provided below;

2018	ENGLISH to IRISH	1
2019	ENGLISH to IRISH	2
2020	ENGLISH to IRISH	2
2020	ENGLISH to ULSTER SCOTS	1
2021	ENGLISH to IRISH	20
2021	ENGLISH to ULSTER SCOTS	3

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 16572/17-22, for an update on the review of the draft report by the Subcommittee on Reform following the RHI Inquiry.

**(AQW 18861/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** I refer the member to my answer to AQW 16572/17-22.

## Department of Health

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 11153/17-22, for a breakdown of the Serious Adverse Incidents currently ongoing by programme of care and Health and Social Care Trust.

**(AQW 12327/17-22)**

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** The table below provides the breakdown of all Serious Adverse Incident reviews currently ongoing broken down by programme of care and HSC organisation.

Programme of Care	HSCB	BHSCT	NHSCT	SEHSCT	SHSCT	WHSCT	NIAS	NIBTS	PCARE*	PHA	Total
Acute Services	0	98	25	12	36	39	31	0	0	1	242
Corporate Business/Other	0	6	3	1	0	3	0	1	0	0	14
Elderly	0	25	5	8	6	10	0	0	0	0	54
Family and Childcare (inc CAMHS)	0	32	20	15	8	5	0	0	0	0	80
Learning Disability	0	15	1	2	5	2	0	0	0	0	25
Maternity and Child Health	2	27	8	7	14	6	1	0	0	0	65
Mental Health	0	42	65	47	55	47	0	0	0	0	256

Programme of Care	HSCB	BHSC	NHSC	SEHSC	SHSC	WHSC	NIAS	NIBTS	PCARE*	PHA	Total
Primary Health and Adult Community (inc GPs)	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	1	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>757</b>

Data Source: HSCB Datix

Position at 31/12/2020

\* PCARE - SAIs in relation to GP Practices, Community Dental, Community Pharmacy and Community Optometrists.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health whether there is a shortage of Versatis patches; and whether there will be a change in supply in the coming months.

(AQW 12551/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** My Department is unaware of any ongoing issues affecting the supply of Versatis patches nor at this stage does it anticipate any changes to the supply of Versatis patches in the coming months.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health what further areas of COVID-19 cooperation he is exploring with his counterpart in Dublin, Stephen Donnelly TD.

(AQW 13349/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Throughout this pandemic I have sought to work closely with my counterparts across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to protect public health. I am committed to a continuation of that work, on issues such as cross-border travel, data sharing, contact tracing and other health related matters.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health whether he is considering implementing mandatory quarantine in hotels for arrivals to Northern Ireland from specific countries with a high incidence of COVID-19 and COVID-19 variants of concern.

(AQW 13394/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Department officials worked with colleagues in The Executive Office, who led a Task and Finish Group to implement managed hotel isolation for NI arrivals from red list countries. This new policy was introduced within the NI International Travel Regulations from 16th April 2021, ahead of the resumption of direct international flights into NI. There are currently no direct international flights from red list countries, however NI arrivals travelling indirectly from a red list country to NI are subject to managed hotel isolation here. Passengers travelling to NI from a red list country via GB or ROI would be subject to managed hotel isolation at the point of first arrival, before transiting on to NI.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to commission an inpatient eating disorder unit.

(AQW 14034/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The Mental Health Action Plan identified a Review of Eating Disorder services for completion by March 2021. The Review has been received by the Department, is being considered and will help shape the new 10 year Mental Health Strategy.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Health (i) whether The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 ceased to have effect as a result of a failure to be approved by resolution of the Assembly within a period of 28 days beginning with the day on which they were made in accordance with the Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967; and (ii) to detail the ramifications of the failure to approve the regulations within the 28 period, including the effect on any offences allegedly committed by persons in contravention of the restrictions.

(AQW 14289/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 were made on 7 January 2021. The Assembly was in recess from 19 December until 10 January 2021. The 28 day period for approval of a statutory rule by resolution of the Assembly does not include any period of Assembly recess therefore taking into account 4 days of recess 7, 8, 9 & 10 January 2021, the 28 day period commenced on Monday 11 January and the last day of the 28 day period was Sunday 7 February.

Under the Interpretation Act (NI) 1954 Section 39(4), Statutory Rules cannot expire on a Sunday and as a result of this stricture the expiration date accordingly moves to the following Monday. In this case the expiration date was Monday 8 February 2021. The Regulations were approved by resolution of the Assembly on Monday 8 February 2021.

If the amendment had not been approved by resolution of the Assembly within the required 28 day period, the amendment would cease to have effect but that does not affect the validity of any offences allegedly committed under the regulations before they ceased to have effect.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health when he expects restrictions on the operation of caravan parks to be lifted.  
**(AQW 14551/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** As part of a balanced package of careful relaxations announced on 15 April, the Executive decided that from 30 April, overnight stays are permitted in self-contained accommodation provided it is only occupied by one household or one bubble. Self-contained accommodation may include holiday homes, self-catering houses, static caravans, touring caravans and motorhomes.

Residents in campsites and caravan parks will not be permitted to access on-site indoor communal facilities except for waste disposal.

On 2 March this year, the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

The Executive COVID Taskforce, through a process of cross-departmental and inter sectoral engagement, is responsible for first considering and advising the Executive on the future relaxation of regulations.

**Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Health in what specific circumstances will his advisors consider lifting all COVID-19 restrictions.  
**(AQW 14801/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** On 2 March 2021 the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

In this new process, the management of the changes to the restrictions regulations moved to the Executive Office (TEO).

TEO will now hold the lead responsibility and operational management of the process leading to Executive decisions on the ongoing need for restrictions and the requirement to amend the regulations.

This responsibility includes receiving and managing all proposals from Executive departments, management of the decision making process and facilitating consultation with departments on the drafting of amendment regulations. This work is supported by a Cross-Departmental Working Group, chaired by the Director of the TEO COVID-19 Taskforce team with membership from all 9 Departments and key stakeholders, including local government and PSNI.

**Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Health in what conditions he will be recommending to the Executive the reopening of click and collect for all businesses.  
**(AQW 15068/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** From April 1, click and collect purchases were allowed from garden centres and plant nurseries. On April 12, all other non-essential retailers were able to resume click-and-collect services. Restrictions on retail were further lifted on 30 April 2021, when all retail was able to resume.

Shops must take all reasonable measures to manage risk, including ensuring measures are in place to maintain physical distancing.

A face covering must be worn in any retail premises, including any indoor area of a shopping centre, unless exempt.

Information on how to stay safe when shopping is available at NI Direct.

On 2 March this year, the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

The Executive COVID Taskforce, through a process of cross-departmental and inter sectoral engagement, is responsible for first considering and advising the Executive on the future relaxation of regulations.

**Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Health in what precise conditions he will be recommending to the Executive that gyms are reopened.  
**(AQW 15069/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** On 2 March this year, the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

The Executive COVID Taskforce, through a process of cross-departmental and inter sectoral engagement, is responsible for first considering and advising the Executive on the future relaxation of regulations.

On 15 April the First and deputy First Minister made a Statement to the Assembly on the Executive's decision to ease restrictions. Among these were that, from 30 April, individual activities in gyms, swimming pools and other large venues are permitted – including with a carer and to allow 1-2-1 training/coaching with social distancing.

From 24 May we hope to resume indoor group exercise and training in numbers limited to suit the venue, dependent on the conditions remaining favourable.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given to the reopening of golf courses.  
**(AQW 15109/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** From 1 April 2021, up to 10 people (including children of all ages) from a maximum of two households can participate in outdoor sport such as golf. Up to **15 people** (including coaches) can take part in structured outdoor sports events, organised through clubs or individuals affiliated to recognised sports governing bodies or representative organisations for sport and physical activity.

Outdoor sports facilities can re-open but only to permit their use for those allowed in the regulations. Club houses and indoor sports facilities (changing rooms, showers, kitchens, meeting rooms), apart from essential toilet facilities must stay closed.

On 2 March this year, the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

In this new process, the management of the changes to the restrictions regulations moved to the Executive Office (TEO).

TEO will now hold the lead responsibility and operational management of the process leading to Executive decisions on the ongoing need for restrictions and the requirement to amend the regulations.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the rationale for keeping garden centres closed; (ii) the rationale of keeping smaller, independent garden centres closed, even for click and collect services, while larger multinational stores selling similar products are able to remain fully open; and (iii) what conversations he has had with the Department for the Economy regarding this issue.  
**(AQW 15128/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** On 1 April 2021 the Executive agreed a range of relaxations which came into effect on 12 April including the reopening of Garden Centres and Plant Nurseries. As with other businesses, they were subject to the requirement to operate safely and to follow health and safety law and guidance and to take measures to keep staff and customers safe.

On 15 April 2021 the Executive agreed that from 30 April all retail businesses were permitted to reopen.

On 2 March 2021 the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

In this new process, the management of the changes to the restrictions regulations moved to the Executive Office (TEO).

TEO will now hold the lead responsibility and operational management of the process leading to Executive decisions on the ongoing need for restrictions and the requirement to amend the regulations.

This responsibility includes receiving and managing all proposals from Executive departments, management of the decision making process and facilitating consultation with departments on the drafting of amendment regulations. This work is supported by a Cross-Departmental Working Group, chaired by the Director of the TEO COVID-19 Taskforce team with membership from all 9 Departments and key stakeholders, including local government and PSNI.

**Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Health in what precise conditions he will be recommending the reopening of close contact services in Northern Ireland to the Executive.  
**(AQW 15155/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** As part of a balanced package of careful relaxations announced on 15 April 2021, the Executive decided that from 23 April 2021, close contact services, such as hairdressers, beauticians, make-up and nails, tattoo and piercing parlours, tanning shops, massage, electrolysis, well-being and holistic treatments, (including those provided from a mobile setting) could reopen, strictly by appointment, with face coverings to be worn by staff and clients unless exempt or if not possible due to the nature of the service.

Driving instruction, theory tests and driving tests also resumed on 23 April 2021.

Close contact businesses are required to collect customer details to help with the Test, Trace, Protect contact tracing programme.

Guidance on keeping workers and clients safe during COVID-19 in close contact services is available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/keeping-workers-and-clients-safe-during-covid-19-close-contact-services>

**Ms Rogan** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of inspections for each month carried out by Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority for each month since March 2020 that were (i) remote inspections; and (ii) on-site, physical inspections.

**(AQW 15476/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The table below provides details of all RQIA inspections conducted during the period 1 March 2020 to 28 February 2021.

Month	On Site	Remote	Blended*	Grand Total
Mar-20				114**
Apr-20	6	4	0	10
May-20	16	2	1	19
Jun-20	29	5	0	34
Jul-20	36	5	4	45
Aug-20	76	7	7	90
Sep-20	171	22	11	204
Oct-20	149	19	22	190
Nov-20	143	17	25	185
Dec-20	117	8	10	135
Jan-21	120	14	5	139
Feb-21	125	33	6	164
<b>Total</b>	<b>988</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>1329</b>

\* Blended inspections involve elements of both remote and on-site inspection.

\*\* From April 2020 onwards RQIA recorded inspections as onsite, remote or blended. No breakdown held for March 2020.

**Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health to detail the medical and scientific evidence explaining why caravan parks and holiday parks remain closed; and when they will reopen fully.

**(AQW 15527/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** As part of a balanced package of careful relaxations announced on 15 April, the Executive decided that from 30 April, overnight stays are permitted in self-contained accommodation provided it is only occupied by one household or one bubble. Self-contained accommodation may include holiday homes, self-catering houses, static caravans, touring caravans and motorhomes.

Residents in campsites and caravan parks will not be permitted to access on-site indoor communal facilities except for waste disposal.

On 2 March this year, the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

The Executive COVID Taskforce, through a process of cross-departmental and inter sectoral engagement, is responsible for first considering and advising the Executive on the future relaxation of regulations.

The Executive, when making decisions on restrictions, takes into account the scientific and medical evidence and also the impacts of the restrictions on the economy and society. The Executive weighs up the totality of the effect each restriction can have in combination with other restrictions in reducing the rate of infections of COVID-19. It is not always possible to disaggregate the precise impact on the rate of transmission of the virus in the community for each of the individual restrictions on their own.

Scientific evidence used by the Executive for decision making purposes is now publically available: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

**Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health when wedding venues can reopen in line with their own risk assessments and with adequate social distancing.

**(AQW 15529/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** 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 at present. An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the resumption of post ceremony receptions or functions (with numbers to be informed by a risk assessment for the venue). This will be subject to review.

Customers can 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.

Further guidance is available on NI Direct at the following link: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-weddings-and-civil-partnerships>

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Health when swimming clubs will be able to reopen for youth training.  
**(AQW 15589/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** On 2 March this year, the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

The Executive Office, through a process of cross-departmental and inter sectoral engagement, is responsible for first considering and advising the Executive on the future relaxation of regulations.

On 15 April the First and deputy First Minister made a Statement to the Assembly on the Executive's decision to ease restrictions. Among these were that, from 30 April, individual activities in gyms, swimming pools and other large venues are permitted – including with a carer and to allow 1-2-1 training/coaching with social distancing.

From 24 May we hope to resume indoor group exercise and training in numbers limited to suit the venue, dependent on the conditions remaining favourable.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail the steps being taken reduce the stigma of mental health issues.  
**(AQW 15623/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The reduction of stigma around mental health is a key action within Protect Life 2, the Suicide Prevention Strategy for Northern Ireland.

A range of training and awareness programmes are being delivered to reduce stigma and increase understanding of mental health and wellbeing. These include:

- Mindset Adult and Mindset Adolescent Mental health awareness training;
- Psychological First Aid;
- Stress control;
- Mental Health First Aid;
- Living Life to the full;
- Connections – Link Life suicide Awareness programme;
- Healthy Me;
- Provoking thought

During 2010 – 2020, around £1 million has been invested in 334 programmes within local communities to encourage them to be pro-active in promoting positive mental health and emotional wellbeing through the promotion of the Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing.

Considerable promotion and engagement in Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Campaigns have also been delivered including:

- Mental Health Awareness Week.
- A 5 week joint campaign from September to October entitled 'Working Together for Mental Wellbeing' Mental Health Campaign.
- Input to the Community Pharmacy Living Well Campaign.
- Specific COVID Take 5 messaging resources and toolkits developed and promoted.
- 'Mindingyourhead.info' website containing the new COVID wellbeing hub revamped and updated.
- Production of educational resources such as Help is at Hand, Steps to Stress booklet and self-help guides which are widely disseminated.
- Development of the HSCNI Apps Library.

**Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health why dry cleaners are classified as an essential service in COVID restrictions; and whether this status will change.  
**(AQW 16113/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Northern Ireland Executive published a list of essential businesses that are allowed to stay open to the public during the coronavirus pandemic laundrettes and dry cleaners were included on that list in the interests of hygiene and public safety. As with other businesses, they were subject to the requirement to operate safely and to follow health and safety law and guidance and to take measures to keep staff and customers safe.

On 2 March 2021 the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

In this new process, the management of the changes to the restrictions regulations moved to the Executive Office (TEO).

TEO will now hold the lead responsibility and operational management of the process leading to Executive decisions on the ongoing need for restrictions and the requirement to amend the regulations.

This responsibility includes receiving and managing all proposals from Executive departments, management of the decision making process and facilitating consultation with departments on the drafting of amendment regulations. This work is supported by a Cross-Departmental Working Group, chaired by the Director of the TEO COVID-19 Taskforce team with membership from all 9 Departments and key stakeholders, including local government and PSNI.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health when consideration will be given to the opening of indoor sport training for individual sports such as gymnastics.

**(AQW 16651/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** On 15 April the First and deputy First Minister made a Statement to the Assembly on the Executive's decision to ease restrictions. Among these were that, from 30 April, individual activities in gyms, swimming pools and other large venues are permitted – including with a carer and to allow 1-2-1 training/coaching with social distancing.

From 24 May we hope to resume indoor group exercise and training in numbers limited to suit the venue, dependent on the conditions remaining favourable.

**Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Health when (i) bridal shops; and (ii) mens wedding attire shops will open by appointment only, to allow brides and grooms to have their fittings.

**(AQW 16755/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** As part of a balanced package of careful relaxations announced on 15 April 2021, the Executive decided that close contact services, including dress fitting and tailoring could reopen from 23 April, strictly by appointment, with face coverings to be worn by staff and clients unless exempt or if not possible due to the nature of the service.

Close contact businesses are required to collect customer details to help with the Test, Trace, Protect contact tracing programme.

Guidance on keeping workers and clients safe during COVID-19 in close contact services is available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/keeping-workers-and-clients-safe-during-covid-19-close-contact-services>

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health what consideration he is giving to prioritising fire fighters in the vaccination programme.

**(AQW 16817/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The member will be aware that the NI Covid-19 Vaccination Programme is grounded in the recommendations on priority groups issued by the JCVI in December 2020. Beyond health and social care workers and care home staff, JCVI has not recommended prioritisation by occupation, including fire fighters.

The vaccination programme has moved on at pace and is now vaccinating down to priority group 11, those aged over 30. I note at the time of writing some 962,585 people have received a vaccine.

While the rate limiting factor for deployment is the availability of vaccines, ultimately it is expected that all adults over the age of 18 will be offered the vaccine in coming months and it is hoped the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme will be completed as quickly as possible.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health for an update on mobile breast screening services, including any delays or backlog currently being experienced.

**(AQW 16853/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Following a 4 month pause due to Covid-19 the Northern Ireland Breast Screening Programme resumed in July 2020. Outside of the Belfast Trust, most screening mammograms are carried out on mobile breast screening trailers. These units are working hard to reduce the backlog by providing extra clinics during evenings and weekends, whilst ensuring the recovery of the programme does not compromise on quality.

Over 25,000 women who had their screening delayed due to this pause were offered a screening appointment by the end of September 2020.

There is a backlog of 7,390 women waiting for breast screening across the four breast screening units, including mobile and static sites.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health to detail the current (ii) target times for a child to receive an autism assessment from point of referral; and (ii) wait times for an assessment, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

**(AQW 16994/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Health and Social Care Board has set targets for Trusts that all children wait no longer than 13 weeks for assessment following referral and a further 13 weeks for commencement of specialised intervention.

Waiting times for an autism assessment for children at 31 December 2020, following a referral, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: The number of children in Northern Ireland waiting for an autism assessment following referral by Health and Social Trust (31 December 2020)**

HSC Trust	Number of children waiting for assessment following referral by time waiting			
	0-13 weeks	>13-26 weeks	>26-52 weeks	>52 weeks
Belfast	211	170	434	724
Northern	367	260	847	206
South Eastern	79	0	0	0
Southern	112	0	0	0
Western	156	109	293	527
Northern Ireland	925	539	1,574	1,457

**Source:** Autism Waiting Times (Children) return, Health and Social Care Board

**Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Health when gyms will be reopened; and what evidence and data is used to justify their continued closure.

**(AQW 17008/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** On 15 April the First and deputy First Minister made a Statement to the Assembly on the Executive's decision to ease restrictions. Among these were that, from 30 April, individual activities in gyms, swimming pools and other large venues are permitted – including with a carer and to allow 1-2-1 training/coaching with social distancing. From 24 May we hope to resume indoor group exercise and training in numbers limited to suit the venue, dependent on the conditions remaining favourable.

The Executive, when making decisions on restrictions, takes into account the scientific and medical evidence and also the impacts of the restrictions on the economy and society. The Executive weighs up the totality of the effect each restriction can have in combination with other restrictions in reducing the rate of infections of COVID-19. It is not always possible to disaggregate the precise impact on the rate of transmission of the virus in the community for each of the individual restrictions on their own.

Scientific evidence used by the Executive for decision making purposes is now publically available: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

**Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Health when caravan parks will be reopened; and what evidence and data is used to justify their continued closure.

**(AQW 17009/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** As part of a balanced package of careful relaxations announced on 15 April, the Executive decided that from 30 April, overnight stays are permitted in self-contained accommodation provided it is only occupied by one household or one bubble. Self-contained accommodation may include holiday homes, self-catering houses, static caravans, touring caravans and motorhomes.

Residents in campsites and caravan parks will not be permitted to access on-site indoor communal facilities except for waste disposal.

On 2 March this year, the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

The Executive COVID Taskforce, through a process of cross-departmental and inter sectoral engagement, is responsible for first considering and advising the Executive on the future relaxation of regulations.



The Executive, when making decisions on restrictions, takes into account the scientific and medical evidence and also the impacts of the restrictions on the economy and society. The Executive weighs up the totality of the effect each restriction can have in combination with other restrictions in reducing the rate of infections of COVID-19. It is not always possible to disaggregate the precise impact on the rate of transmission of the virus in the community for each of the individual restrictions on their own.

Scientific evidence used by the Executive for decision making purposes is now publically available: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the number of children currently waiting for a pica assessment; (ii) the waiting times for pica assessment in each Health and Social Care Trust; and (iii) the support available to families waiting for assessment.

**(AQW 17041/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The number of children currently waiting for a pica assessment and the waiting times for assessments in each Health and Social Care Trust is not held by my Department, or routinely collected by the Health and Social Care Trusts. Therefore, to provide the requested information would require a manual trawl through hundreds of files at a disproportionate cost.

A pica assessment is an issue that can be identified by a range of programmes and services and support would be provided accordingly thereafter.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health to detail the waiting lists for counselling services in Belfast, broken down by district.

**(AQW 17061/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Department does not hold this information centrally and it was requested from Belfast Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust. Belfast HSC Trust advised that the only counselling service provided by Belfast HSC Trust is in Lifeline, all other counselling services sit in the Community and Voluntary Sector.

Please find information detailed below.

**Table 1. Number of persons waiting for counselling services, by waiting time-bands and district, in Belfast HSC Trust, as at 31 March 2021.**

Counselling Services	0-6 weeks*	>6 to 9 weeks days)	9+ weeks
Belfast North	<5	0	0
Belfast East	<5	0	0
Belfast South	<5	0	0
Belfast West	<5	0	0

**Source:** Belfast HSC Trust

\*Figures suppressed for confidentiality.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health to detail the demand for mental health services at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, Omagh.

**(AQW 17101/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** In 2020/21, there were a total of 751 admissions to the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital broken down as follows:

- 666 Adult Mental Health admissions; and
- 85 Primary Care and Older People admissions.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health, in relation to Trust rebuilding plans, when respite services will resume for service users and carers.

**(AQW 17327/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Respite services/short breaks are open at a reduced capacity, in line with Infection Prevention Control (IPC) requirements and social distancing guidelines. IPC and social distancing guidelines are subject to regular review cognisant of the rollout and effectiveness of the vaccine programme and rates of infection.

Services are continuously monitored and assessed so that service uptake and unfilled spaces are reallocated where possible to do so. Aligned to this process, Trusts have been working with families and community colleagues to scope additional/ alternative supports, including Direct Payments, and domiciliary and short break options.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health to detail the arrangements for the resumption of wedding receptions.

**(AQW 17471/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** 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 at present. An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the resumption of post ceremony receptions or functions (with numbers to be informed by a risk assessment for the venue). This will be subject to review.

Customers can 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.

Further guidance is available on NI Direct at the following link: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-weddings-and-civil-partnerships>

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Health (i) whether he will review the current guidelines limiting hospital visiting; (ii) when he will undertake this review; and (iii) why children under 16 years of age cannot visit adult family members in hospital.

**(AQW 17540/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department completed a review of visiting restrictions in all care settings, including in hospitals, and published the resulting updated guidelines for visiting on 30 April 2021, effective from 7 May 2021.

The updated guidance draws no distinction between children and adults visiting in hospitals, save that "All people visiting are expected to adhere to wearing of PPE as guided by the staff" and there is an expectation that the responsibility to ensure that children adhere to all IPC measures will rest with the adult accompanying them.

**Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health how many children have been assessed by a paediatric ophthalmology team, in each of the last three years, and are on the waiting list for surgery in each Health and Social Care Trust.

**(AQW 17609/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Paediatric ophthalmology is provided as an in-reach service by the Belfast and Western HSC Trusts. Table 1 shows the number of children on the waiting list for paediatric ophthalmology surgery at 31st March in each of the last three years. These children will have previously attended an appointment at a paediatric ophthalmology clinic.

**Table 1. Number of patients waiting for Paediatric Ophthalmology surgery**

Year Ending	Belfast HSC Trust	Western HSC Trust
31st March 2019	116	76
31st March 2020	156	43
31st March 2021	191	3

Paediatric Ophthalmology refers only to children aged 15 years and younger. All children aged 16 years and older are referred to the adult ophthalmology service on their 16th Birthday.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health to detail the waiting list numbers for cataract procedures for (i) routine appointments; and (ii) urgent referrals.

**(AQW 17772/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** On the 31st December 2020, there were (i) 5,545 patients awaiting a routine cataract procedure and (ii) 920 patients awaiting an urgent cataract procedure, as detailed in the table below.

Urgency	Number of Weeks Waiting						Total
	0-6	>6-13	>13-21	>21-26	>26-52	>52	
Routine	359	547	448	220	1,337	2,634	5,545
Urgent	298	292	102	22	95	111	920
<b>Total</b>	<b>657</b>	<b>839</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>1,432</b>	<b>2,745</b>	<b>6,465</b>

**Source:** DoH Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of Covid vaccination distribution by Health and Social Care Trust.

**(AQW 17867/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The member may be aware that the breakdown of the NI Covid Vaccination delivery, by the Health and Social Care Trust Programme is available on the NI Covid-19 Vaccinations Dashboard. The data and visualisations are derived from the Northern Ireland Vaccinations Management System (VMS) and provide detailed information about the vaccination

programme. The Dashboard also includes a breakdown of vaccination distribution by postcode which may also be of interest to the member.

The link to the Dashboard is below:-

NI Covid-19 Vaccinations Dashboard | COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Northern Ireland (hscni.net)

The vaccination programme has been moving at pace and is now vaccinating down to priority group 11, those aged over 30. I note at the time of writing some 968,386 people have received a vaccine through the Health and Social Care Trust Programme together with their service partners, including GPs, Mobile Teams and Community Pharmacy.

While the rate limiting factor for deployment is the availability of vaccines, ultimately it is expected that all adults over the age of 18 will be offered the vaccine in coming months and it is hoped the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme will be completed as quickly as possible.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health why vaccination appointments for the 35-39 cohort are not yet available for the North West; and when does he anticipate roll-out for the area will commence.

**(AQW 17868/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The member will be aware that the Vaccination Programme is now open to all adults aged over 30 across Northern Ireland.

The member may be aware that the vaccination programme has been moving at pace and is now vaccinating down to priority group 11, those aged over 30. I note at the time of writing some 114,799 or 45.6% of 30-39 year olds have received their vaccination since the programme was opened to the cohort from 30th April 2021.

The NI Covid-19 Vaccinations Dashboard provides detailed real time information, and plans are being developed to provide data in 5 year cohorts. The link to the Dashboard is below:-

NI Covid-19 Vaccinations Dashboard | COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Northern Ireland (hscni.net) (<https://covid-19.hscni.net/ni-covid-19-vaccinations-dashboard/>)

Ultimately it is expected that all adults over the age of 18 will be offered a vaccine in the coming months and it is hoped the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme will be completed as quickly as possible.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Health for an update on Phase 2 of Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex for Acute Mental Health services and facilities.

**(AQW 17909/17-22)**

**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, unfortunately this was not delivered.

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.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health how many staff have been employed in the Fire and Rescue Service in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 17925/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The table below details the number of staff employed in Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service in the last 5 years.

	31 March 2017	31 March 2018	31 March 2019	31 March 2020	31 March 2021
Wholetime	818	844	834	834	822
OnCall	955	948	872	882	901
Control	55	55	59	57	59
Support	199	184	189	201	208
Agency	44	57	50	41	45
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,071</b>	<b>2,088</b>	<b>2,004</b>	<b>2,015</b>	<b>2,035</b>

Figures provided are headcount and exclude Board composition.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health whether the Fire and Rescue Service has availed of any agency staff in the last five years and at what financial cost.

**(AQW 17926/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has availed of agency staff in the last 5 years. The annual costs are detailed in the table below:

	Financial Year				
	2017	2018	2019	2020	*2021
Agency Staff Costs (£'000)	767	1,060	1,216	1,144	1,229

\* Please note 2021 figure is provisional outturn subject to audit

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health to detail the total amount spent on adapting Whiteabbey Hospital as a Covid Recovery facility; and how this investment will benefit the hospital site in the long term.

**(AQW 17931/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** £4,170,089 has been spent to date on the Whiteabbey Nightingale facilities. This has enabled the completion of works to provide a regional COVID-19 enhanced rehabilitation facility, to ease pressures on acute and ICU beds across the region. From late November 2020 to the end of March 2021, 145 patients were treated at the facility, with 1,654 acute bed days saved.

As the pressure from the current wave of COVID-19 eases, the Whiteabbey facility has now turned its focus to providing a regional rehabilitation service for non-COVID-19 patients, to help with efforts to rebuild.

At the same time, my Department and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust are exploring potential longer-term uses for the Whiteabbey Nightingale facility. While this work is at an early stage, the legacy usage will build upon the existing enhanced rehabilitation model, including the recruited staff, the facilities and the equipment available on site.

It is important to note, however, that we remain aware that COVID-19 is unpredictable and will likely remain with us, to a greater or lesser degree, for some time. That is why a key principle of the legacy work will be to ensure that the Nightingale facility retains the ability to refocus quickly again on COVID-19, should the need arise.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health how many children in the Western Health and Social Care Trust have been (i) diagnosed with gastroenterology problems; and (ii) referred to other Trust areas for paediatric gastroenterology services.

**(AQW 17941/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The information requested is not held within the Department. The question was put to the Western Health and Social Care Trust for their response. Western Trust advised that they could not provide this information, as their systems do not capture coded information on children with gastroenterology issues, who are initially seen at outpatients clinics.

Children who are admitted as an inpatient or for a diagnostic procedure or surgery for gastroenterology issues are treated within Belfast Trust, and may be referred directly from their GP to Belfast Trust. Again, the coding of paediatric systems in Belfast Trust is such that it is not possible to accurately report the number of patients.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health how many paediatricians in each Health and Social Care Trust specialise in gastroenterology.

**(AQW 17943/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Information provided by Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts on the number of paediatricians employed who specialise in gastroenterology is detailed in the table below.

HSC Trust	Paediatricians Specialising in Gastroenterology
Belfast	3 (2 Consultants & 1 Specialty Doctor)
Northern	0 *
South Eastern	0
Southern	0
Western	0

\* All general paediatricians in the Northern HSC Trust would see gastroenterological problems referred from primary care, but for more specialised paediatric gastroenterology advice, patients would be referred onwards to the tertiary service in the Belfast HSC Trust.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health how many patients have travelled outside this jurisdiction to get treatment for spinal injuries or conditions over the last five years; and to outline the average cost to these patients.

**(AQW 18010/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Information on the number of patients who have travelled outside this jurisdiction is not held within the Department, and was requested from the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

HSCB have advised that there are four different routes that patients can use to access orthopaedic treatment outside NI supported by the HSCB:

- a Extra Contractual Referral (ECR)
- b EU Cross Border Directive route (CBD)
- c Transfer as part of a waiting list initiative
- d Transfer as part of a service level agreement

The table below details the number of patients who have been approved under the ECR process to travel outside NI for assessment and/or treatment relating to spinal injuries or conditions over the last 5 years.

Year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
No. approvals	<10	<10	18	<10	<10

Note that small figures are suppressed to protect patient privacy.

**Source:** Health and Social Care Board

The average cost of spinal injuries or treatments approved via the ECR process was not held by the Department nor by HSCB. Unit costs for spinal HRGs range from £443 to £30,063 depending on complexity, and costs vary year on year.

The table below details the number of patients who have been reimbursed for treatment costs under the EU Cross Border Directive (CBD), and the average amount reimbursed over the last five years.

Financial year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
No. patients reimbursed	<10	11	<10	28	21
Average cost	£4,256	£5,657	£4,685	£5,570	£4,525

Note that small figures are suppressed to protect patient privacy.

**Source:** Health and Social Care Board

HSCB do not hold details on the number of patients transferred either as part of a waiting list initiative or as part of a service level agreement. The Belfast HSC Trust was unable to provide this information within the timeframe allocated.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health how he will meet the inequalities that his Department's High Level Screening Exercise identified as having a major impact relating to racial groups, age, gender and disability.

**(AQW 18109/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** You will be aware that the 2021/22 Budget settlement was extremely disappointing for Health. My Department has been able to utilise non-recurrent Covid and transformation funding to protect frontline services and maintain existing services as much as possible, and, through this minimise the impact on service delivery, patients and clients. However non-recurrent funding is not the ideal solution and will impact on all Section 75 groups as it inhibits longer term solutions which might ultimately represent better value for money.

The impacts identified in my Departments High Level Equality Screening have informed considerations in making funding allocation decisions and s75 screening will continue to inform budgetary considerations, within the constraints of the allocation.

In that context it is now the responsibility of my Departmental policy officials and ALBs to consider the equality/human rights/rural needs implications of the implementation of the Budget settlement and take forward screening, EQIAs and related consultation as required.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health how much was spent on adapting the Whiteabbey hospital as a (i) Nightingale facility; and (ii) COVID-19 recovery facility.

**(AQW 18115/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Northern Health and Social Care Trust makes no distinction between the Nightingale facility and COVID-19 recovery facility. The total capital spend on the adaptation of Whiteabbey hospital as a Nightingale facility/COVID-19 recovery facility was £4,170,089.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given to the recommencement of parent and toddler activities.

**(AQW 18153/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The classification of parent and toddler groups has been set out in the response to AQW 17834/17-22. The next formal review of the Regulations is scheduled to take place on or before 13 May 2021.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health in light of the renewed pressures and the pandemic and the increase in vacancies in Health and Social Care, whether the commissioning of allied health professionals staffing levels, including speech and language therapist undergraduate places, has been reviewed.

**(AQW 18179/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Yes. All education and training commissioned by my Department, including that of the Speech and Language Therapy pre-registration programme, is reviewed on an annual basis. A range of factors are taken into account including staffing and vacancy levels across the HSC, recommendations from workforce reviews and the availability of funding.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to detail the cost associated with each Local Commissioning Group, in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 18191/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The direct costs associated with each Local Commissioning Group (LCG), in each of the last five years are set out in the table below.

£000's

LCG	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	Grand Total
Belfast	48	45	45	43	49	230
Northern	63	46	44	48	56	257
South Eastern	76	86	78	40	55	335
Southern	61	61	61	64	54	301
Western	89	76	68	50	51	334
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>296</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>265</b>	<b>1,458</b>

\*Data Source HSCB. Table may not add exactly due to rounding.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Health (i) whether the definition of 'enclosed' and 'substantially enclosed' for outdoor areas in hospitality venues within the Health Protection Regulations are the same as those in regulations under the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006; and (ii) to outline such definition.

**(AQW 18200/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The definition of 'enclosed' and 'substantially enclosed' comes from the Smoke-free (Premises, Vehicle Operators and Penalty Notices) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 and is directly referenced in the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021. The definition is as follows:

Enclosed and substantially enclosed premises

2.—(1) For the purposes of Article 3 of the Order, premises are enclosed if they—

- (a) have a ceiling or roof; and
- (b) except for doors, windows and passageways, are wholly enclosed either permanently or temporarily.

(2) For the purposes of Article 3 of the Order, premises are substantially enclosed if they have a ceiling or roof but there is—

- (a) an opening in the walls, or
- (b) an aggregate area of openings in the walls, which is less than half of the area of the walls, including other structures that serve the purpose of walls and constitute the perimeter of the premises.

(3) In determining the area of an opening or an aggregate area of openings for the purposes of paragraph (2), no account is to be taken of openings in which there are doors, windows or other fittings that can be opened or shut.

(4) In this regulation "roof" includes any fixed or moveable structure or device which is capable of covering all or part of the premises as a roof, including for example, a canvas awning.

This is the same definition that has been within the regulations since July 2020. There has been no change to this definition as a result of the recent amendments which allowed outdoor hospitality to open from 30 April 2021.

The focus of these measures remains to minimise the risk of transmission of the virus. In allowing outdoor hospitality to reopen, we also need to be very mindful of the risks to staff working in venues, as well as to the customers they serve and the wider public. This is why providing for good ventilation and airflow is important. Responsibility for enforcing the regulations on outdoor areas rests with local councils.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health to outline the process for appealing a decision on commissioning of services made by either the Local Commissioning Group or the Health and Social Care Board.  
**(AQW 18209/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** There is no formal appeals process relating to commissioning decisions.

The HSC Board engage the HSC Trusts in the planning process to ensure there is general consensus on the services to be commissioned to deliver against the commissioning direction.

Where an HSC Trust considers that other services should be commissioned then they have a number of ways of taking this forward with the HSC Board for further consideration. This could be via correspondence to the Director of Commissioning or Chief Executive, or through regular HSC Trust/Board meetings.

In more general terms, any interested individual, representative or organisation has the right to express their views and can do so via correspondence to relevant organisations or by raising a formal complaint at any time.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health to detail the services that will be impacted by the reported £400 million blackhole for health services.  
**(AQW 18223/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The £400m relates to the minimum my Department would need to secure in the 2022/23 budget exercise to maintain services at existing levels.

As part of the 2021/22 Budget my Department has been able to utilise non-recurrent Covid and transformation funding to mitigate funding pressures in relation to existing services, to meet some new inescapable pressures, and to fund some of our New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) priorities.

Whilst we have restricted the amount of non-recurrent funding we have used in this way to around £250m, with our estimate of pay and price inflation in 2022/23 at some £150m we will require an additional £400m above our current baseline in 2022/23 just to stand still.

I will be making a robust case to secure additional funding as part of the next budget process, but if sufficient funding is not secured I will need to assess the impact on services at that time.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health what organisations are expected to avail of the £40 million outlined in his Department's budget to address elective care waiting lists.  
**(AQW 18224/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Funds will be allocated to the five Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland to support the provision of additional waiting list initiative work. In addition, given the detrimental impact of Covid-19 on elective care services there will clearly be a need to continue to utilise IS capacity both within and outside Northern Ireland in 2021/22. Furthermore, a number of private healthcare providers are providing in-sourcing services whereby privately recruited teams of clinicians are providing services for HSC patients using available HSC infrastructure.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Health what direct financial support has been awarded to unpaid carers, and those in receipt of payment via the direct payments scheme, during the pandemic.  
**(AQW 18231/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department does not make direct financial payments to (unpaid) carers nor clients in receipt of Direct Payments.

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. A payment to carers will be significantly more complex to administer than recent one-off payments made to other groups.

I have written to my Executive colleagues requesting their support with this initiative as cross-departmental collaboration will be required. Work is underway to explore how we can make such a payment a reality.

The HSC Trusts do have the facility to make a cash grant payment to carers following the completion of an assessment of their need. Such payments can be made to replace a broken domestic appliance or to pay for a short break for the carer.

Direct Payments are paid by the HSC Trusts to those people who have been assessed as needing help from social services, and who would like to arrange and pay for their own care and support services instead of receiving them directly from the local trust.

Statistics on the use of Direct Payments are published quarterly by my Department. The most recent statistics available can be accessed via: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/quarterly-direct-payments-statistics-month-december-2020>

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Health for a financial breakdown of the £4m Carers Support Fund; and whether frontline carers will be direct financial benefactors of this fund.

**(AQW 18232/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Support for Carers' Fund has a total value of £4.4m. The Fund will be administered and managed by the Community Foundation NI on behalf of the Department and for this service they will receive a sum of £302k from the Fund.

The Fund will be used to provide financial grant support to organisations with charitable status who can help the Fund achieve its stated high-level outcomes, namely:

- a) Enhanced provision of, and access to, practical supports and help for carers.
- b) Improved access to, and availability of, advice services for carers, including support available through new technologies.
- c) Enhanced skills of carers to advocate for the needs of both themselves and the person they care for.
- d) Support for improved physical and mental health and wellbeing of carers.
- e) Enhanced ability for carers to lead their own lives and enjoy a work/life balance.
- f) Increased capacity to advocate for and advance carers' issues with Government and statutory bodies.
- g) Raised awareness of the contribution of carers.
- h) Improved evidence base on carers to support and inform service provision, and Government strategy.

The Fund will not make any grant payments to individuals or non-charitable organisations (e.g. private sector businesses).

It is expected that the Fund will open for applications within the next few months.

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health what steps are being taken to restore face to face appointments for children's speech and language therapy in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust; and whether children will continue to have the option of online appointments.

**(AQW 18239/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Face-to-face Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) appointments currently are being provided for children from Special Schools and Special Education Needs units within the Southern HSC Trust. The SLT service is also being provided to other children in the community via telephone, virtual means, and face-to-face appointments as appropriate to the child's individual requirements. In addition, a small number of SLT sessions are carried out in homes and schools.

The SLT service will continue to offer virtual options and will consider new ways of working that have been developed during the pandemic.

**Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Health when can healthcare workers will receive their £500 COVID-19 special recognition payment.

**(AQW 18240/17-22)**

**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>

Work is ongoing to commence payment of the award to HSC statutory sector employees in July. This will facilitate a period in which staff can consider if payment by instalments better suits their individual financial circumstances. Other employers, such as in the Independent Sector, may work to a different timescale. Discussions are ongoing with the Independent Sector around eligibility and payment. As soon as any further information is available, it will be published on the FAQ.

**Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Health whether carers in private nursing homes are eligible for the £500 COVID-19 special recognition payment.

**(AQW 18241/17-22)**

**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>

Those in the Independent sector will also be eligible.

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 Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health how positions on the Local Commissioning Groups are appointed or assigned.  
(AQW 18252/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The prescribed number of persons appointed to each Local Commissioning Group is 17.

5 Members (2 Social Workers, 1 Nurse, 1 Registered Public Health Specialist and 1 professional registered under the Health Professions Order (2001) (13) ) must be employees of the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) or Public Health Agency (PHA). An internal process is undertaken by each body for these appointments.

12 Members (4 general medical practitioners, 4 Local Government members, 2 representatives from voluntary organisations, 1 dental practitioner and 1 pharmacist) must practise/have an interest in health and social care within the area of the Local Commissioning Group. For these members, a recruitment process is undertaken for any vacant positions by the HSCB with recommendations for appointment brought to a public Board Meeting for consideration. The HSCB then seeks Department of Health approval for proposed appointments of these 12 members.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to detail the spend by each Health and Social Care Trust on agency staff in the last five years, broken down by service.

(AQW 18253/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Trust expenditure on agency staff has been incurred to ensure that safe and effective services are sustained and contributes importantly to maintaining service provision to patients and clients. HSC Trusts employ locum staff for several reasons, for example, cover for sickness and maternity/paternity leave; cover for existing vacancies; and when demand increases over the winter months. The primary aim of this is to ensure that safe and effective services are sustained at all times for patients and clients.

The Department monitors Health and Social Care Trusts' expenditure on agency staff on a quarterly basis for specific staffing categories, across financial years. Information is not collected by service area. Expenditure on Agency Staff by Health and Social Care Trust, for the last five financial years, is given below. The last available data, currently available, for a complete financial year is 19/20.

The Department is committed to sustained investment in growing the local nursing and midwifery workforce to meet ever increasing demands, for example, this year we have commissioned the highest ever number (1,325) of pre-registration nursing and midwifery training places.

TRUST	Financial Year 15-16	Financial Year 16-17	Financial Year 17-18	Financial Year 18-19	Financial Year 19-20
BHSCT	£32,672,660	£43,244,356	£48,518,366	£61,936,896	£87,036,461
NHSCT	£16,602,079	£27,510,402	£35,456,999	£40,786,240	£49,845,009
SEHSCT	£11,52,298	£17,591,196	£21,644,503	£24,491,315	£26,751,455
SHSCT	£11,956,924	£21,022,007	£22,547,487	£33,620,899	£45,775,842
WHSCT	£18,423,394	£24,761,177	£27,069,947	£38,336,918	£42,554,198
NIAS	£591,187	£617,899	£871,789	£2,126,207	£2,767,894
<b>Total</b>	<b>£91,398,542</b>	<b>£134,747,037</b>	<b>£156,109,091</b>	<b>£201,298,476</b>	<b>£254,730,859</b>

**Source:** HSC Trusts

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health how he will address waiting lists for Crohn's, colitis and other inflammatory bowel diseases.

(AQW 18289/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** A number of initiatives have been introduced in recent years to improve waiting times for Crohn's, Colitis and other inflammatory bowel diseases. For example, diagnosis of IBD is now supported by gastroenterology primary care pathways and the provision of laboratory tests, specifically Calprotectin testing. These have enabled clinicians to prioritise outpatient referrals for IBD and better manage patients who are already undergoing treatment for IBD. Dietitians also play a vital role in managing conditions such as Coeliac and IBS thereby freeing up consultant capacity within hospitals to see more patients with suspected IBD.

More generally, bringing our waiting times to an acceptable level across all specialties is a long term collective effort requiring sustained and substantial investment and additional staffing. It is in that context that I recently announced my intention to publish an elective care framework which will set out both the immediate and longer term actions and funding requirements.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health, other than contracts for personal protective equipment, whether his Department or Health and Social Care Trusts have engaged in any other contracts with Clandeboye Agencies.

(AQW 18291/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Other than contracts for personal protective equipment neither this Department nor its ALBs have engaged in any contracts with Clandeboye Agencies.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health when the development of a new Tobacco Control Strategy, including electronic cigarettes and vaping, will commence.

**(AQW 18321/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department's 10-year Tobacco Control Strategy for Northern Ireland was launched in 2012. A recent review was carried out in collaboration with a number of relevant stakeholders and the report was published on the Department's website in February 2020. This includes recommendations that provide an opportunity to refocus on priority areas for the remaining term of the strategy.

Since then, my Department has been dealing with a considerable number of issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has had significant staffing implications and officials have been concentrating on assisting with the public health response to the ongoing emergency. However, consideration will be given to the future strategic direction around tobacco control in due course.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health, as part of the ongoing consultation into a duty of candour resulting from the recommendations in Justice O Hara's report into the hyponatremia scandal, what specific measures are taken to consult families who lost loved ones.

**(AQW 18328/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Hyponatraemia Implementation Programme has specific arrangements for consulting the families who lost loved ones about the work of the programme. Information relating to the Duty of Candour and Being Open consultation, including a copy of the Duty of Candour and Being Open consultation document, was shared with the families prior to the launch of the consultation, and there is a standing offer for those families to contact the Department if they wish to discuss any related matter.

The Duty of Candour and Being Open Workstream has also developed and agreed a Consultation Involvement plan, which includes plans to consult with a wide range of stakeholders during the public consultation, including patients and service users.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health how he will recruit staff for vacant (i) consultancy posts; and (ii) nursing posts.

**(AQW 18330/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Responsibility for recruitment of such staff sits with Health & Social Care organisations. However, the Department has taken action to support the need for continual recruitment of staff to fill vacancies and grow the workforce. To this end, the Department, among many other actions:

- has maintained nursing and midwifery pre-registration training provision at of 1,325 places in 2021;
- has reintroduced pay parity with England for health and social care workers on Agenda for Change terms, backdated to April 2019;
- has committed to work with trade unions on a safe staffing agenda, and on measures to safely reduce reliance and spend on agencies and locums;
- has supported HSC in the recruitment of 876 international nurses and;
- is implementing a Workforce Strategy with the aim that by 2026, we have a workforce of the optimum number, with the best combination of skills and experience.

In addition, the Department is encouraging HSC employers to work in partnership with staff side at a local level to develop proposals and initiatives to support the retention of HSC staff post-Covid.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health what proportion of staff in Muckamore Abbey are (i) full time permanent; (ii) part time permanent; (iii) bank staff; (iv) redeployed staff from other Trusts or services; and (v) agency staff.

**(AQW 18332/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Information provided by the Belfast Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust on the number of staff in Muckamore Abbey Hospital (MAH) is detailed in the table below.

Personnel Area	Full time	Part time	Agency	Bank	Redeployed from other Trusts
Medical *	10	3	2	0	0
Administrative	19	11	0	0	0
Estates	14	0	0	0	0
Professional & Technical	10	3	0	0	0

Personnel Area	Full time	Part time	Agency	Bank	Redeployed from other Trusts
Social Services	26	13	0	0	0
Support Services	0	14	0	0	0
Nursing & Midwifery	119	2	113.44	23.51	0

\* Including 9 rotational trainee posts

**Notes:**

- 1 Personnel area defined by the Trust Organisation Management System.
- 2 Agency and Bank staff recorded as WTE based on the number of hours they have worked weekly or been allocated to work at 26th April.
- 3 Figures exclude suspended staff.
- 4 Nursing and Midwifery figures include both registrants and non-registrants who work throughout the site in wards, day care and with the other healthcare services.
- 5 A number of staff provide services to the MAH site but whose main post resides outside MAH.
- 6 Allied Health Professions, Pharmacy and Psychology sit under the Professional and Technical personnel area – MAH have good support from these services and work in the hospital even if they do not sit operationally in the structures.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health to detail the annual budget allocation awarded in each Health and Social Care Trust to each hospital.

**(AQW 18338/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Information on the annual budget allocation awarded in each Health and Social Care Trust to each individual hospital is not readily available as budgets are not managed by hospital site.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health to detail the funding allocated by the Ambulance Service to each Health and Social Care Trust between 1 March 2020 and 30 April 2021.

**(AQW 18339/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service does not allocate funding to Health and Social Care Trusts.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 16894/17-22, whether Health and Social Care staff who are on leave due to the impacts of long-Covid will have their pay reduced at any stage of their leave.

**(AQW 18350/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** As outlined in the response to AQW 16894/17-22, sickness absence related to COVID-19 does not currently form part of any absence triggers, and is not to be viewed as such in relation to a member of staff's sickness absence record. This was instigated as an early, and vital, infection control measure to prevent those who may have contracted the virus from reporting to work, and inadvertently transmitting it to colleagues or vulnerable patients.

The HSC, in line with the NHS across the other jurisdictions, has long-established mechanisms for sickness absence and pay which are applicable to illness resulting in short-term absence, as well as for longer term, chronic conditions. As we move forward, it will be important to review the current arrangements to ensure an equity of approach to all individuals with long-term illness.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health for an update on progress on the introduction of HPV primary screening into the cervical screening programme.

**(AQW 18358/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** In January 2020, my Department asked the Health and Social Care Board to consider the actions needed to implement the National Screening Committee (NSC) recommendation that the NI Cervical Screening Programme should adopt HPV as the primary screening test for identifying those women who are at increased risk of developing cervical cancer. As a result of the diversion of resources into the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, this work is not as well progressed as I would otherwise have expected.

In March 2019, my Department announced the commissioning of a new Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland, it is envisaged that this will go out to public consultation this summer. In addition, a Cancer Recovery Plan - 'Building Back; Rebuilding Better' is being developed to address the immediate issues in adult cancer services that have been made much worse by the pandemic. Planning for the introduction of primary HPV testing in the NI Cervical Screening Programme will form a part of this recovery plan. I fully support the implementation of the National Screening Committee recommendations in this area.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of mental health and suicide prevention funding by constituency, over each of the last five years.

**(AQW 18361/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Funding allocations are provided by Health and Social Care Trust rather than by constituency, therefore this information is not available.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health what assessment he has made of the potential role of community pharmacy in multi-disciplinary teams, with specific emphasis on mental health service provision, making use of pharmacy locations and accessibility in local communities.

**(AQW 18363/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Primary Care Multi-disciplinary Teams (MDTs) Programme introduces new physiotherapy, social work and mental health roles into general practice, to work alongside enhanced levels of nursing 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 wellbeing.

There are currently no plans to expand the MDT model to include community pharmacists.

The importance of community pharmacists in the delivery of mental health services was highlighted to the Department during a recent public consultation on a new Mental Health Strategy.

The response to the Strategy is still being considered, including how the role of community pharmacy/pharmacists can best be included.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health when amenities at caravan sites can reopen.

**(AQW 18367/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** As part of a balanced package of careful relaxations announced on 15 April, the Executive decided that from 30 April, overnight stays are permitted in self-contained accommodation provided it is only occupied by one household or one bubble. Self-contained accommodation may include holiday homes, self-catering houses, static caravans, touring caravans and motorhomes.

Residents in campsites and caravan parks will not be permitted to access on-site indoor communal facilities except for waste disposal.

On 2 March this year, the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

The Executive COVID Taskforce, through a process of cross-departmental and inter sectoral engagement, is responsible for first considering and advising the Executive on the future relaxation of regulations.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health whether he will increase the numbers of people permitted at outdoor wedding receptions.

**(AQW 18377/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** From 12 April 2021 the numbers attending ceremonies in places of worship, a Local Government venue or other venues, such as hotels, are determined by risk assessment for the venue specific to a marriage/civil partnership ceremony. This also applies to an outdoor marriage.

A maximum of 10 people can attend including all participants and the officiant.

Receptions or post ceremony gatherings are not permitted at present. An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the resumption of post ceremony receptions or functions (with numbers to be informed by a risk assessment for the venue). This will be subject to review.

Customers can 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.

Further guidance is available on NI Direct at the following link: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-weddings-and-civil-partnerships>

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health for an update on plans to replace the Cross Border Health Care Scheme (EU Directive 24/2011 on Cross-Border Healthcare).

**(AQW 18393/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My officials have provided me with an options paper which I have considered and I will be making an announcement shortly on this issue.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Health when the findings of the Public Health Agency working group on the development of an approach supporting the safe and proportionate return to normalised visiting in care homes, including arrangements for visiting out, will be published.

**(AQW 18394/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** A new approach to supporting the safe and proportionate increased visiting in care homes has been developed by the Public Health Agency in a co-production approach including input from residents, families, statutory agencies, care home providers and other stakeholders.

New guidance for visiting in hospices and hospitals was issued on 30 April 2021, effective from 7 May 2021, and represents a significant easement in the restrictions formerly in place.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 18097/17-22, to detail the 'did not attend' appointments for the last three years, broken down by hospital department.

**(AQW 18405/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Data relating to outpatient activity, including the number of appointments patients missed/did not attend (DNA), are published annually by financial year. The number of missed outpatient appointments, known as DNAs (Did Not Attend) is defined as 'the number of patients who did not attend, and failed to give advance warning to the hospital, for an outpatient appointment. This includes patients who cancelled their outpatient appointment on the same day on which the appointment was scheduled. These should not be confused with those who could not attend and who did warn the hospital in advance (before the day on which the appointment was scheduled)'.

This data is available by hospital site in the most recent publication which was released in August 2020 and can be found at the following link:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/hospital-statistics-outpatient-activity-statistics-201920>.

Data for 2020/21 is not available by hospital site.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail any research his Department has carried out into the effects of minimum alcohol pricing on public health.

**(AQW 18406/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department previously commissioned a report from the University of Sheffield which concluded that a Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) for alcohol would be effective in reducing alcohol consumption, alcohol-related harms (including alcohol-related deaths, hospitalisations, crimes and workplace absences) and the costs associated with those harms. This report is available in full on the DoH website at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/alcohol-and-drug-mup-ni-report-from-university-of-sheffield.pdf>

Once finalised, NI's forthcoming new Substance Use Strategy will contain my commitment to have a full consultation on MUP within the next year. This consultation will examine a range of possible options in respect of alcohol pricing, including consideration of the emerging evidence of the effectiveness of MUP following its implementation in Scotland and elsewhere. Any policy considerations arising from the consultation will be brought to the Executive in due course.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health to detail the current waiting list for mental health services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, broken down by (i) time spent on the waiting list; and (ii) age bracket.

**(AQW 18410/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Department does not hold this information centrally and it was requested from the Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT).

Table 1 sets out the number of active waits for mental health services in WHSCT, broken down by time bands.

Table 2 sets out the number of active waits for mental health services in WHSCT, broken down by age bands.

**Table 1: Number of active waits for mental health services in WHSCT, broken down by time bands, as at 31st March 2021.**

MH Service	0-3 weeks	>3 to 6 weeks	>6 to 9 weeks	> 9 to 13 weeks	> 13 weeks	Total Waits
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service	58	51	33	33	98	273
Adult Mental Health	243	195	75	42	123	678
Dementia	25	45	49	69	297	485
Psychological Therapies	63	88	91	83	1,326	1,651

MH Service	0-3 weeks	>3 to 6 weeks	>6 to 9 weeks	> 9 to 13 weeks	> 13 weeks	Total Waits
Paediatric Psychology	2	6	6	5	146	165
<b>Total</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>1,990</b>	<b>3,252</b>

**Source:** Western Health and Social Care Trust

Note: Figures are taken from live administrative systems and are therefore subject to change.

**Table 2: Number of active waits for mental health services in WHSCT, broken down by age bands, as at 31st March 2021.**

MH Service	0 - 17	18 - 64	65 +	Total Waits
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service	273	0	0	273
Adult Mental Health	1	618	59	678
Dementia	0	57	428	485
Psychological Therapies	440	1,159	52	1,651
Paediatric Psychology	165	0	0	165
<b>Total</b>	<b>879</b>	<b>1,834</b>	<b>539</b>	<b>3,252</b>

**Source:** Western Health and Social Care Trust

Note: Figures are taken from live administrative systems and are therefore subject to change.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the decision to offer a limited number of vaccination appointments in the SSE Arena for younger age groups while older cohorts in other regions, such as the north west, have struggled to get a vaccination appointment.

**(AQW 18422/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The member may be aware that the Vaccination Centre at the SSE Arena opened at the end of March as a facility for all those who are eligible and 60 years and under, not already vaccinated through the Trust or GP Programmes as part of an earlier priority cohort.

The Community Pharmacy Programme has also now opened for all eligible age cohorts and will remain a rolling programme for some time to come. This Programme is particularly suitable on those for whom travelling to a large vaccination centre would be challenging. Booking is available on-line or, if preferred, by telephone on 0300 200 7813.

I note at date of writing Western Trust has delivered over 141,000 doses of vaccine. In addition, the SSE Arena is open to citizens across Northern Ireland to book an appointment. All adults aged 30 and over are now eligible for vaccination and at date of writing over 986,000 individuals have received a first dose with over 500,000 persons having received both doses.

The model for vaccine deployment has been designed to be pragmatic, agile and flexible, and as capacity becomes available the decision is made to open the programme to a younger cohort on a rolling basis. This is to facilitate maximum vaccine deployment and uptake, and keep vaccine wastage to a minimum.

The HSCNI Vaccination Dashboard provides a real time update on the success of the programme, particularly those in the older age cohorts, and can be found at:-

<https://covid-19.hscni.net/ni-covid-19-vaccinations-dashboard/>

While the rate limiting factor remains the availability of vaccine, the programme is continuing at steady pace and is very close to the target to vaccinate 1 million people in NI within days of writing.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to detail each position within primary care multidisciplinary teams that is currently being recruited, broken down by profession.

**(AQW 18438/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Primary Care Multi-disciplinary Teams (MDTs) model introduces new health and social care professionals into primary care, and aims to move from a system of treating illness to holistically supporting good physical and mental health and social wellbeing. It is implemented through a partnership approach, with mental health practitioners being employed by the local GP Federation and social work, first contact physiotherapy, district nursing and health visiting staff being employed by the appropriate HSC Trust.

The model has been fully implemented in the Down area, and is in development in the Derry, West Belfast, Causeway, Newry & District and Ards & North Down GP Federations.

Current recruitment is shown below:

GP Federation	Role	Band	Details
Derry	Physiotherapist	7	External recruitment has resulted in a waiting list for future vacancies for a training post, should recruitment for Band 8A physiotherapists be unsuccessful.
	Physiotherapist	8A	External recruitment ongoing to form a waiting list for future vacancies.
	Social worker	7	External recruitment has resulted in a waiting list for future vacancies.
West Belfast	Mental health practitioner	7	One post. External recruitment ongoing.
	Physiotherapist	8A	External recruitment ongoing for 0.6 WTE.
Newry	MDT Trust Project Manager	8A	One post. Internal recruitment ongoing through Expression of Interest process.
	Social Work Assistant	4	One post. Internal recruitment ongoing through Expression of Interest process.
	Physiotherapist	8A	External recruitment to compile a waiting list for future vacancies.
	Social worker	7	External recruitment to compile a waiting list for future vacancies.
	Mental health practitioner	7	External recruitment to compile a waiting list for future vacancies.

It is anticipated that recruitment will commence shortly for permanent social work, social work assistant, district nursing and mental health practitioner posts in the Ards & North Down area, as current appointments are on a temporary basis. There is no current recruitment to MDT posts in the Causeway or Down GP Federations.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health what is being done to reduce waiting times for rheumatology services.  
(AQW 18464/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The pandemic has had an inevitable and serious impact on already unacceptable waiting times

To address this issue, I recently announced that I intend to publish an elective care framework setting 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 across a range of specialties, including rheumatology, is a long term collective effort requiring sustained and substantial investment and additional staffing.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health what percentage of refugees and asylum seekers have received a vaccination for COVID-19.  
(AQW 18465/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Plans are in place to vaccinate Asylum Seekers on 18th and 19th May 2021. This is to facilitate the end of the Ramadan period on 12th May and to ensure the availability of translators.

Vaccination will be offered to asylum seekers regardless of the status of their application. 761 individuals have been offered vaccination via this mechanism.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health what work has been done, or is being considered, to make supermarkets, food suppliers and producers reduce the quantity of sugar in their products.  
(AQW 18467/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** My Department leads on obesity prevention through the cross-Departmental framework 'A Fitter Future For All'. Within this framework there are a number of industry focused outcomes, of which the Food Standards Agency (FSA) is the main delivery partner.

The FSA's Eating Well Choosing Better (EWCB) programme implements a structured and transparent programme of food product improvement in Northern Ireland with small and medium sized enterprises and supermarkets who manufacture, sell or serve foods that contribute to nutrients of public health concern (namely sugar, saturated fat and salt) and calories in the

Northern Ireland diet. The EWCB programme aligns with the UK Government's sugar reduction and wider reformulation programme with UK retailers and producers operating in Northern Ireland.

To date, reformulation work has focused on the bakery and ice-cream sectors, the two key manufacturing industries in Northern Ireland. Progress to date has included nutrition sampling of bakery products in partnership with district councils, reformulation trials and workshops with the industry, the production and distribution of sector specific guidance and regular engagement with Invest NI and local colleges who provide funding and support to the food industry for reformulation.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health what assurances he can give that concerns raised by medicines manufacturers in respect of regulatory requirements arising from Brexit are being given the highest priority, and that sufficient measures will be put in place to ensure continuity of medicines supplies into Northern Ireland in 2022 and beyond.

**(AQW 18495/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** An agreement between the UK Government and EU Commission was reached to give the pharmaceutical industry 12 months from 1 January 2021 to comply with regulatory requirements. From 1st January 2022 industry will have to supply medicines to NI that comply with the packaging and labelling requirements of the EU Falsified Medicines Directive and also comply with additional batch testing and certification on goods moving from GB to NI. The 12 month grace period appears, at present, to have broadly mitigated the immediate risk of companies reducing their products and portfolios available for supply to the NI market.

My Department has frequent and ongoing engagement with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in England and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) to ensure a process is in place to enable industry to be ready by 1st January 2022.

In particular, DHSC has established a Northern Ireland Protocol Programme Board involving DHSC, MHRA and DoH officials. The programme will include the implementation of a multi-layered approach for the continued supply of all medicines and medical products to NI. My Department is also liaising with DHSC in the development of guidance to inform the pharmaceutical industry of what actions they need to take to be ready for 1st January 2022 and the possible mitigations that may need to be put in place.

My Departmental officials have been engaging regularly with suppliers of medical products, and with representatives from the pharmaceutical industry to discuss the industry's plans for continuing supplies into NI from January 2022. At this stage, many pharmaceutical businesses are awaiting further guidance before making their final decisions.

In February, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove wrote to the European Commission to seek an extension to the current 12 month grace period (for compliance with the new importation requirements for medicines) until at least 1 January 2023. The letter from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster also requested a long-term approach to ensure no barriers of any kind to the movement of medicines into Northern Ireland.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health to detail the meetings that he or his officials were involved in with British government representatives in relation to adding India to the coronavirus red list; and when those meetings occurred.

**(AQW 18538/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The COVID-19 Operations Committee held an urgent UKG Ministerial call on the afternoon of Monday 19 April 2021, to discuss the reports of a worsening epidemiological situation in India. JBC provided an updated risk assessment to reflect the Variant Under Investigation (VuI). Following the COVID-O call, a decision was taken to add India to the red list in England and NI aligned in position that same afternoon. The International Travel Regulations were amended, effective from 4am on Friday 23 April, in line with other UK regions.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health (i) whether NHS patients from Northern Ireland are still able to access surgery and other medical procedures, with the cost covered by the Health and Social Care Board, in (a) other jurisdictions of the UK; (b) the Republic of Ireland; (c) the EU; and (d) private clinics; and (ii) what impact Brexit has had on these arrangements.

**(AQW 18548/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:**

- (i) There are a number of different ways in which patients can access healthcare outside of Northern Ireland with the cost covered by the Health and Social Care Board.

#### **Transfer as part of a waiting list initiative**

This can occur where, as part of a drive to reduce waiting times, a provider from outside Northern Ireland is chosen to deliver additional capacity for patients waiting for HSC assessment or treatment. Such providers are normally based in the rest of the UK or in the Republic of Ireland.

#### **Contractual arrangements/service level agreements/MoUs**

A number of service level agreements are in place between Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland and providers outside Northern Ireland to secure dedicated capacity for referrals for highly specialist services which are not suitable to be provided in Northern Ireland and for which there is a sufficient, predictable annual volume of activity



There are also a number of MoUs which facilitate cross border and all Ireland healthcare such as between ambulance services and the radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Hospital.

#### **Extra Contractual Referrals**

The Health and Social Care Board in Northern Ireland may authorise patient travel for specialist treatment which it does not routinely commission.

This may be either because the treatment needed is of a specialist nature which is not available in Northern Ireland or because there is a clinical reason why the local service is not appropriate. The provider is chosen by the local consultant using his clinical judgement. The Health and Social Care Board expects these requests to be to NHS providers in the UK but will consider requests to EU countries including the Republic of Ireland where there is clear clinical rationale for doing so.

#### **Private clinics**

Management of waiting lists is one of the mechanisms by which the health service upholds the principle of equity of access to health and social care services free at the point of care. Where a patient chooses to pay for private treatment at the time of their choosing, doing so takes them outside the Northern Ireland HSC system's arrangements and its principles. It would be inequitable for the Health and Social Care Board to fund individuals for private treatment so that they could access care in advance of others on the waiting list who may have greater clinical need. Accordingly, the Health and Social Care Board would not cover the costs incurred.

- (ii) The UK's exit from the EU has no impact on these arrangements.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health (i) whether the £500 special recognition payment for Health and Social Care Staff is considered income; (ii) what tax and National Insurance deductions will be applicable as a result; (iii) how the payment will affect any income-related benefits of the recipient; and (iv) what the rules are for similar schemes in England and Wales relating to the same issues.

**(AQW 18550/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:**

- i Yes, the £500 special recognition payment for Health and Social Care Staff is considered income.
- ii. The payment will be subject to the tax and NI rates appropriate to the individual.
- iii. As this is classed as income derived from employment, those in receipt of certain income assessed benefits may see their benefits reduced or paused, but will be better off overall. To mitigate the impact on benefits, HSC Trusts will be offering any individual concerned with the option of receiving their award in instalments.
- iv. The NHS in England has not implemented a Recognition award, NHS Wales has adopted the same principles as here, with staff being afforded an option to receive payment by instalments. Subject to formal approval from the Department of Finance, the payment to be made will be up to £735 per individual, meaning that those who pay tax at 20%, and National Insurance at 12%, will receive up to £500 after tax and National Insurance deductions

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health to outline his intentions to publish the report into the mass resignation of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority Board, including a timeline for publication; and when his Department received the report.

**(AQW 18572/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department received the finalised version of report into the mass resignation of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority Board on 25th January 2021. The findings and recommendations of the report will be published in the coming weeks.

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health whether GP surgeries are receiving sufficient and regular supplies of COVID-19 vaccines to ensure all patients receive their second dose by the 12 week deadline as recommended by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

**(AQW 18680/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The GP Programme is receiving sufficient and regular supplies of Covid-19 vaccine to ensure all patients receive their second dose by the 12 week deadline as recommended by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

GP Practices in Northern Ireland are only using AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine. This vaccine is also being used by Community Pharmacies and HSC Trusts. The recommended interval between doses is up to 12 weeks, although a 2nd dose can be given after a longer interval.

When a supply of AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine arrives in Northern Ireland it is allocated to GP Practices, Community Pharmacies and Trusts by my Department. The Health and Social Care Board then share the GP allocation across the 321 individual GP Practices.

The Health and Social Care Board are prioritising allocations to practices to provide 2nd doses based on an interval of approximately 10 weeks between 1st and 2nd doses. To facilitate this, practices have been asked to provide weekly requirements for 2nd doses since 19th March.

All practices have had these requirements met within the 12 week recommendation, including several urgent deliveries where practices have contacted the Health and Social Care Board giving short notice about planned clinics to administer 2nd doses.

The NI Covid-19 Vaccination Programme is still on target to vaccinate all eligible adults by late summer 2021.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health whether GP practices have adequate supplies of COVID-19 vaccines; and whether there have been any reports of COVID-19 vaccine supply disruption to GP practices.

**(AQW 18706/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The GP Programme has had more than adequate supplies of Covid-19 vaccine. GP Practices in Northern Ireland are only using AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, which is also used by Community Pharmacies and HSC Trusts.

When a supply of AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine arrives in Northern Ireland it is allocated to GP Practices, Community Pharmacies and Trusts, by my Department. The Health and Social Care Board then share the GP allocation across the 321 individual GP Practices. The Health and Social Care Board are prioritising allocations to practices to provide 2nd doses based on an interval of approximately 10 weeks between 1st and 2nd doses. To facilitate this practices have been asked to provide weekly requirements for 2nd doses since 19th March.

The GP Programme has continued at pace, with all practices having had their vaccine supply needs met within the 12 week recommendation.

The Northern Ireland Covid-19 Vaccination Programme is still on target to vaccinate all eligible adults by late summer 2021.

## Department for Infrastructure

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has the remit to, and is exploring ways to, combat littering specifically on roads.

**(AQW 17826/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** Under the Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994 (as amended by the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011) the removal of litter from a public road is for the most part the responsibility of the relevant local Council. My Department's responsibilities in relation to the removal of litter is limited to 'designated roads', which includes the motorway network and 'special roads' such as the A12 Westlink.

Sadly the main issue with litter is societal, with some people not accepting their responsibility to respect their surroundings and dispose of their litter appropriately or take it home with them. I can assure you that my Department recognises the value of maintaining a clean and tidy countryside that enhances visual amenity and protects and enhances biodiversity.

We will continue to fulfil our obligations on those roads for which we have responsibility and, if appropriate, my officials will alert Councils when we detect roads, which fall within their remit, that have an accumulation of litter and require attention.

**Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan published in July 2020, (i) for her assessment of its recommendations; (ii) what steps her Department will take in relation to its recommendations; and (iii) how the recommendations are being factored into the future Programme for Government outcomes.

**(AQW 17865/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am aware that the COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan was launched in July 2020 and I agree that now, as we look forward to moving out of COVID-19 restrictions, we must tackle inequalities that exist in all aspects of women's life in Northern Ireland.

The Women's Resource and Development Agency also alerted me to their intention to develop a Departmental-specific plan and to meet with me to discuss their recommendations at a later time. Officials have read the Department for Infrastructure report which was published in October 2020. This recommends that in all our COVID Recovery Plans we should ensure that:

- women's groups are adequately represented in all departmental COVID-19 recovery planning procedures; and
- the women's sector is consulted with and included in the co-design of all Departmental strategies and the Programme for Government.

Other difficulties women face daily have been highlighted in the Department for Infrastructure report, and I look forward to discussing these should the WRDA wish to meet with me in due course.

Throughout the pandemic, my Department has been focused on the safe delivery of its essential services. My Department did not produce a specific COVID Recovery Plan using instead its Civil Contingency Plan(s) to guide it through this pandemic. However, given the important role of infrastructure, my Department's work will be reflected within the work the Executive is

taking forward on a recovery plan for the next 24 months identifying the short to medium term interventions required to jump-start longer term renewal and Programme for Government delivery.

My Department also includes women's groups in its decision making, including the Women's Resource and Development Agency, sending links to consultations and other documents. This provides such groups with the opportunity to participate and represent women in our decision making.

Engagement with stakeholders, including representations received from women's groups, will inform the development of DfI-led actions for inclusion in the forthcoming Programme for Government.

**Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 16684/17-22, whether under her departmental Roads Policy and Procedure Guide the stipulation for 20mph part time speed limits that schools 'should be considered for installation where vehicle speeds outside and around schools are high or further improvements to road safety are deemed necessary' applies to schools on roads adjacent to main roads.

**(AQW 17886/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The Departmental policy and procedure guide 'Road Safety at Schools RSPPG E070' applies to all schools including those on roads adjacent to main roads.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has engaged with residents about their demands for footpaths on the Glencam Road, Omagh to link up existing and future housing developments.

**(AQW 17910/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department is seeking to provide a road improvement scheme on the Glencam Road from the Killybrack Road Junction to the Gortin Road Junction that incorporates road widening and the provision of a new pedestrian/cycle link. Landowners have been consulted and the Notice of Intention to Make a Vesting Order has recently been advertised for the acquisition of the land needed to facilitate the scheme. It is anticipated that construction could commence in 2022 subject to successful acquisition of the land and the availability of funding.

My Department currently has no proposals to provide a footway on the Glencam Road between Killybrack Road and Old Mountfield Road. However, as a consultee to the planning process my Department takes into consideration many factors, including pedestrian safety, when reviewing planning applications. As such there are a number of recent planning permissions with conditions that include for the construction of footway links along the frontage of the respective sites; delivery of these sections of footway are the developer's responsibility.

At present there are many green field sites along Glencam Road which have not received planning approval. In accordance with the Department's commitment to Active Travel, an assessment will be carried out on the remainder of the Glencam Road to establish if the provision of a footway/ cycleway can be justified and where such a project would rank when compared against the many other competing schemes across the district.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the amount of cycle lanes; and (ii) total distance in kilometres in (a) North; (b) South; (c) East; and (d) West Belfast.

**(AQW 17912/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not record the information sought in the format requested. The table below provides detail on the lengths of various types of cycle infrastructure in Belfast.

On-road painted cycle lanes	49 km
Shared footway / cycleway	37 km
Cycle tracks physically separated from traffic and pedestrians	4 km
Traffic-free shared paths away from the road	63 km

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline how many reviews have taken place into on-street parking in town centres in recent years.

**(AQW 17921/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** On-street Charged Parking Zones (CPZ) were introduced to towns outside Belfast in 2008, to help address parking issues in town centres where all-day parkers tended to occupy 'prime' spaces outside businesses.

In Lisburn and Newry, the establishment of CPZs followed surveys by external consultants and considerable engagement and communication with Councillors, Town Centre Management Committees and local Chambers of Commerce. There were also public consultations held on the proposals, the responses to which were broadly supportive of the proposals. A combination of tariffs and enforcement by Parking Attendants ensure that there is a sufficient turnover of spaces to meet the needs of shoppers who only require a short stay, while encouraging motorists who require a longer stay to use off-street car parking.

Any removal of tariffs for on-street parking is likely to increase congestion as well as air pollution, as car users who may otherwise have paid to park in off-street car parks would be encouraged to find a 'free' space.

The most appropriate place to carry out a review of the controlled parking zones is within the development of my Department's Transport Plans. These will be developed in conjunction with each Council's Local Development Plan (LDP) Local Policies Plan. The Transport Plans will require my Department and each Council to jointly prepare a Parking Strategy, which will consider the provision, management and operation of all parking both on and off street. These strategies will also take account of the shared objectives for our towns and cities and for greater use of sustainable modes of transport including public transport, walking and cycling.

In the meantime, as we emerge from COVID lockdown, I am well aware of a renewed interest in how street space in our towns and cities can best be utilised, to promote the objectives of commercial vitality and improved local public spaces. Changing our current approach to the management of parking by promoting free on-street parking is likely to result in an increase in town centre vehicular traffic, which would work against these shared objectives.

In addition, making on-street car parking more attractive than off-street parking will rule out the possibility of creating footway extensions, hospitality spill-out areas, and parklets. These measures have proved popular elsewhere, and I believe that traders and businesses in Newry and Lisburn city centres stand to gain more from these positive place-making measures than from free on-street parking. I have supported all of these measures through the COVID Revitalisation Fund and will continue to do so through my Blue Green Infrastructure Fund.

**Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what engagement her Department has had directly with businesses and residents in Londonderry in relation to plans to implement a one way system in the city centre.  
(AQW 17949/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** The proposed one-way system in Ferryquay Street is one of a number of interventions planned to help better share the street space in the city centre when there is a relaxation of Covid restrictions and an expected increase in pedestrian numbers. As the planned one-way system is a temporary measure it is not subject to formal consultation; however, in accordance with its statutory duty my Department did give notice of the prohibition of turning movements into Ferryquay Street and Carlisle Road in the local papers.

While my Department has not engaged directly with businesses and residents, the measures are being introduced collaboratively with Derry City and Strabane District Council who carried out stakeholder engagement including a webinar and online survey.

**Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what her Department is doing to address the issue of vehicles blocking pavements in Northern Ireland.  
(AQW 17951/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** Where parking restrictions are marked on the road, for example yellow lines, those restrictions also apply to the footway (pavement) or verge. My Department can therefore issue Penalty Charge Notices to vehicles which are parked on the footway or verge, in contravention of restrictions. Certain offences, such as dangerous parking or parking causing an obstruction, have not been decriminalised and responsibility for enforcement remains with the PSNI. To promote and encourage compliance, regular reminders of the Highway Code rules on footway parking are posted on our road safety and sustainable travel social media channels.

My Department has also prohibited footway or verge parking a number of specific locations in response to localised problems associated with vehicles either being parked on the footway, or damaging the verge. There is also a blanket order which prohibits parking in the following areas for traffic management and road safety reasons:

- i on a footway adjacent to a clearway;
- ii. on a footway adjacent to a controlled area at Zebra, Pelican and Puffin crossings;
- iii. on a central reservation adjacent to a clearway;
- iv. on a cycle track adjacent to a clearway; or
- v on a verge adjacent to a controlled area at Zebra, Pelican and Puffin crossings.

I am committed to increasing the level of active and sustainable travel and am aware that vehicles parked inconsiderately on pavements present real challenges for other road users, particularly when they impede footway use. I have therefore have asked my officials to explore if further measures can be introduced to limit footway parking.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) what the procedure is for introducing a Parking and Waiting Restrictions Amendment Order, including required engagement with the public (ii) the reasons for the introduction of a Parking and Waiting Restrictions Amendment Order at Brompton, Bangor.  
(AQW 17969/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** My Department's policy and procedure guide, which sets out the procedure and legislative process for traffic management measures including the introduction of waiting restrictions, can be accessed through the following link:

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/traffic-management-procedures-rsppg-s002>

As part of this process a consultation exercise is undertaken with stakeholders likely to be affected by the proposals and a notice is placed in local papers outlining the consultation period.

Successful completion of this process will allow the waiting restrictions to be enforced.

The restriction at Brompton in Bangor is required to ensure this location is kept free of parked vehicles to facilitate road safety and traffic progression. The restrictions will also ensure access for emergency services and council staff as well as to ongoing maintenance works at the nearby Northern Ireland Water infrastructure.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) the indicative timelines; and (ii) the format for the review into Renewable Energy Planning.

**(AQW 17973/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My decision to review regional planning policy for renewable and low carbon energy was announced on 21 April 2021. In progressing this review, I am mindful of how this issue interfaces with the emerging DfE led Energy Strategy and that the draft policy options for that Strategy have been recently issued for consultation. Substantive work on this review of renewable energy planning policy will be progressed as soon as possible in parallel with the draft Energy Strategy.

The planning policy review will be taken forward in accordance with established policy making best practice. The first step in this process will be engaging with the Infrastructure Committee early next month. A detailed policy development process will be required taking account of the emerging Energy Strategy, the previous planning policy call for evidence, the independent consultant's report that my Department commissioned and wider research. As part of this there will be a period of engagement with a wide range of key stakeholders in the Autumn, including the Infrastructure Committee. I aim to publish a draft renewable and low carbon energy planning policy for public consultation by March 2022.

I also expect that any new policy arising from the review will be referred to the Executive, prior to publication in final form.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure why the item M1 All Lanes (Managed Motorway) appears in her Department's capital budget for 2021.

**(AQW 17974/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Cars Parking on Double Yellow Lines on Church Road and Fort Road, Helens Bay

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what powers her Department has to address the issue of cars parking on double yellow lines on Church Road and Fort Road, Helens Bay.

**(AQW 17997/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The Traffic Management (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 gives my Department the power to use Traffic Attendants to enforce parking contraventions by issuing Penalty Charge Notices, however, certain offences, such as dangerous parking or parking causing an obstruction, have not been decriminalised and the PSNI is therefore still responsible for some enforcement.

**Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to improve road safety in relation to the access and egress of vehicles along Rathgael Road, Bangor.

**(AQW 17998/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** A road improvement scheme on Rathgael Road was carried out in 2019 in association with a planned housing development and involved road widening and the provision of four pedestrian refuge islands. These measures have improved crossing facilities for the local community and enhanced road safety on this busy part of the road network. I am advised that there are no further plans for Rathgael Road at this time.

As with all busy urban roads, drivers must continue to exercise due care and attention at all times and be mindful of their own safety and that of other road users, in particular vulnerable road users such as cyclists and pedestrians.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for the DfI Roads assessment of any drainage issues that could impact on road safety on the A1.

**(AQW 18000/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The A1 dual carriageway from Sprucefield to the border is maintained by the Department via a Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) contract. The DBFO Contract manages and maintains all aspects of the road infrastructure, including the inspection and maintenance of drainage systems. I can confirm that any drainage issues reported have been dealt with; however, my officials would be content to investigate should you have any specific concerns. If required, please contact Aidan O'Callaghan, Departmental Representative for the relevant DBFO Contract, by email at [aidan.o'callaghan@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk](mailto:aidan.o'callaghan@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk).

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the study of the key elements of her Department's existing designated culvert network to determine if additional works are needed to comply with the most recent guidance.

**(AQW 18001/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As part of my Department's asset management processes, officials carry out prioritised programmes of condition assessments on the designated culvert network. Culverts relating to the roads network are also inspected as required.

In addition, to provide further assurance, my Department has commissioned consulting engineers to undertake an independent review of all screened culvert inlets and screened outlets, on designated watercourses, in line with the latest guidance. The review assesses safety and flood risk considerations at each location and identifies if any additional works need to be prioritised and taken forward. This review is well underway, however given the significant number of locations to be assessed, it is anticipated that this commission will run until at least the end of December 2021.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) the level of public funding allocated and planning to be allocated during 2021/22 to support Derry City Airport; and (ii) the expected number of passengers that will benefit.

**(AQW 18014/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As Minister for Infrastructure, my powers relating to NI's three main airports are limited to the Airports (NI) Order 1994. These are powers to control noise, control land in the interests of the safe and efficient use of airports, make byelaws, provide for airport constabularies and airport consultative committees and to give grants to assist capital expenditure.

My Department currently has no funding planned to be allocated to City of Derry Airport in 2021/2022.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 17080/17-22, (i) to detail specifically the accident blackspots in East Antrim; and (ii) the number of accidents that have been recorded at each location.

**(AQW 18016/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The table below provides details of the collision cluster sites identified in East Antrim along with the number of collisions at each site during the period 2016-2018 (the latest available data provided by the PSNI):

Location	Number of Collisions
B59 Doagh Road / Monkstown Road, Newtownabbey.	13
B90 Old Carrick Road / Monkstown Road, Newtownabbey.	4
A2 Shore Road / Glenwell Road, Whiteabbey.	9
A2 Shore Road / Jordanstown Road, Whiteabbey.	8
A2 Shore Road / Gallows Green, Carrickfergus.	7
A2 Shore Road / Windmill Avenue, Carrickfergus.	4
A2 Shore Road / Davys Street, Carrickfergus.	9
A2 Shore Road / Castle Roundabout, Carrickfergus.	7
C75 Albert Road / North Street, Carrickfergus.	6
C75 North Road / Prince William Way, Carrickfergus.	4
C75 North Road / Prince Andrew Way, Carrickfergus.	4
B90 Middle Road / Woodburn Road, Carrickfergus.	5
A8 Harbour Highway / Pound Street, Larne.	8
C72 Old Glenarm Road / Greenland Road, Larne.	5

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what assessment has been made in regards to the electrification of the Larne railway line.

**(AQW 18018/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As Infrastructure Minister, I have made addressing climate change one of my key priorities. I am focused on delivering clean public transport, however the cost of delivering a full decarbonisation of our bus and rail network will be significant.

To date, there has been no assessment to electrify the Larne railway line as this is a decision that needs to be taken strategically across the whole rail network. To that end, I can confirm that the recently announced All Island Strategic Rail review will consider the decarbonisation of the rail network on the island of Ireland.

In addition Translink's ambition is to decarbonise the public transport fleet by 2040 and is undertaking the necessary feasibility studies to examine this issue. Any decision to decarbonise the rail network will therefore need to be taken on a strategic basis considering the technologies available and the funding required at that time.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 16423/17-22, (i) to detail (a) the number of recorded incidents of spills from the network; and, (b) their locations; (ii) the number of recorded incidents of flooding in properties as a result of sewage backing up; (iii) to define the meaning of 'receiving environment'; (iv) to detail the number of unsatisfactory intermittent discharges; (v) what planning approvals and funding have been obtained thus far for improvement works; (vi) for an update on network modelling in regards to the Larne area; (vii) what engagement has been undertaken thus far with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency regarding required work; and (viii) what notice has been given to the public in regards to these issues.

**(AQW 18019/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** NI Water has advised me of the following:

- (i) NI Water's urban drainage model developed for the Larne catchment provides information on predicted spills/ discharges from network assets into the environment. The table below outlines the predicted network spills and defines the receiving environment.

<b>Asset Name</b>	<b>Receiving Water</b>	<b>Annual Spill Frequency</b>
Blackcave WwPS Storm Tanks Overflow	Irish Sea	34
Larne WwTW Storm Tank Overflow	Larne Lough	27
Pound Street / St. Johns Place junction CSO	River Culvert	80
Minnis Fleck Inver River CSO	Inver River	24
Sandy Bay WwPS CSO	Larne Lough	21
Murrayfield WwPS CSO	Inver River	15
Curran Road Loughview CSO	Larne Lough	15
Larne High School CSO	River Culvert	26
Larne Harbour Redlands Road WwPS ERO	Larne Lough	31
Cross Street Pound CSO	River Culvert	27
Blackarch East CSO	Irish Sea	16
Ballygalley Slipway WwPS CSO	Irish Sea	5
Newpark Shore WwPS CSO	Magheramorne River	26
Cranfield Park East CSO	Unnamed	7
Upper Cairncastle Road CSO	Unnamed	3
Cairngorm Drive CSO	Unnamed	2
Kitson's Yard CSO	Unknown	2
Ballygalley Coast Road CSO	Irish Sea	16
Mill Brae One CSO	Inver River	15
Knocklayde CSO	River Culvert	5
Drains Bay WwPS CSO	Killyglen Burn	6
Main Street Agnew CSO	River Culvert	1
Larne Harbour WwPS CSO	Larne Lough	1
Glynn WwPS CSO	Larne Lough	1
Bank Road Larne CSO	River Culvert	5
Inver Primary School CSO	Inver River	1
Mill Brae Two CSO	Inver River	1
NM001385180	River Culvert	2
Circular Road CSO	Inver River	2
Station Road Tank Sewer CSO	Unknown	0.2
Cedar Grove Drains CSO	Killyglen Burn	0.2
NM001382614	River Culvert	1

Asset Name	Receiving Water	Annual Spill Frequency
Brustin Lee WwPS ERO	Ballygalley River	0.4
NM001382423	Combined Network	0.4
Blackcave CSO	Irish Sea	0.2
The Roddens CSO	River Culvert	0.2
NM001382422	Combined Network	0.2
NM001382116	River Culvert	17
Croft Manor WwPS ERO	Ballygalley River	0.3
NM001382119	River Culvert	0.3
Coastguard Road WwPS CSO	Larne Lough	0.1
Casements CSO	Unknown	0.2
NM001385169	River Culvert	1
Cranbourne WwPS ERO	Unnamed	0.1
NM001385179	River Culvert	0.1
Wilmuir Crescent CSO	River Culvert	0.1

- (ii) NI Water has no properties on the external, or internal, flooding DG5 register for the Larne catchment. It has also advised that where flooding has occurred the cause would have been sewer blockages i.e. flooding other causes and not capacity related.
- (iii) The receiving environment is referenced in the table above, provided in response to question (i).
- (iv) NI Water is currently aware of 29 Unsatisfactory Intermittent Discharges (UIDs). This information is based on evidence derived from the urban drainage model, pollution incidents and operational staff, within the Larne network. NI Water has provided spill assessment data to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) for its consideration and to enable a formal 'Statement of Need' for Larne to be generated.
- (v) NI Water has advised that it can progress options to provide solutions, land requirements and planning when it receives the Statement of Need from NIEA. The implementation of any capital improvements in Larne will be subject to prioritisation and the availability of adequate funding. NI Water's PC21 Business Plan includes provision for network sewerage improvements within the Blackcave network.

NI Water is currently awaiting the Utility Regulator's PC21 Final Determination which will include decisions on NI Water's PC21 Business Plan proposals amounting to approximately £2 billion for the period 2021 to 2027. Funding of the PC21 Business Plan, if agreed by the Utility Regulator and NI Water, is reliant on the allocation of adequate funding by the NI Executive. NI Water has advised me that it will take multiple Price Control investment timeframes to address the wastewater system capacity issues. This presents a challenge for the Executive as to how economic development can be supported while the necessary investment is delivered. If insufficient funding is provided, a prioritisation exercise will need to be undertaken, and agreed, with my Department and NI Water's key stakeholders (the UR, NIEA, the Drinking Water Inspectorate and the Consumer Council Northern Ireland). This could lead to significant impacts upon the wastewater upgrade programme.

- (vi) NI Water is currently progressing a Drainage Area Study (DAS) of the Larne catchment (encompassing the Blackcave network). This study, which involves the creation of a detailed hydraulic model to replicate the sewerage network, is at an advanced stage with an anticipated completion date of June 2021. Substantial survey work has been undertaken in the Larne catchment to inform the DAS process (including flow survey, ancillary surveys and CCTV investigations).

The modelling appraisal has identified network capacity issues affecting the catchment. NI Water has, using the DAS process, developed a suite of outline solutions to address both pollution from unsatisfactory overflows and to reduce the risk of out of sewer flooding. The scale of the solutions generated by the DAS (based on precautionary environmental principle) represent a significant capital investment. Therefore it is likely that NI Water will seek to achieve more sustainable catchment outcomes through a parallel Integrated Environmental Modelling (IEM) study.

- (vii) NI Water provided spill assessment data on 22nd April 2021 to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) for its consideration and to enable a formal 'Statement of Need' for Larne to be generated. Please refer to previous answer (iv).
- (viii) NI Water has highlighted wastewater capacity issues, both in relation to Larne and other areas across Northern Ireland, for several years. It's PC21 Business Plan sets out investment requirements to begin addressing capacity issues over the PC21 Price Control period (2021 to 2027) and for future 6 year Price Controls (PC27 and PC33). The Utility Regulator also issued the PC21 Draft Determination for Public Consultation on the 30 September 2020 and presented



the proposals as to how NI Water will begin to address a lack of capacity in its sewerage networks and wastewater treatment works in the PC21 period.

NI Water has made several presentations to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council during 2019/20 and 2020/21. Its staff have also met, on numerous occasions, with Councillors, Council Planners, MEA Chief Executive, MLAs and an MP.

Wastewater capacity information is available on NI Water's website: Wastewater Capacity (niwater.com) (<https://www.niwater.com/wastewater-capacity/>).

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are plans to extend the use of Irish language on public transport to the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area which has several Irish medium schools, Irish language centres and groups.

**(AQW 18021/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I recently announced that Glider services in Belfast between McKinsty Road and Millfield are soon to display passenger information signage bilingually in both Irish and English. This will be introduced as a result of a previous public consultation which was specific to this area.

In order to facilitate an extension of this approach on services in the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area a public consultation would be required to understand the current views of our citizens.

I share your enthusiasm for the visibility and promotion of Irish Language. As I am committed to ensuring equality for Irish language speakers and to delivery of NDNA commitments, I can assure you I will continue to do what I can within the resources available to me and in support of Executive colleagues given their remits in this area.

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans are in place to better connect the road infrastructure in Craigavon to the Belfast/Dublin economic corridor of the A1.

**(AQW 18022/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Craigavon is connected to the A1 Economic Corridor by the M12/ M1 which joins at Blaris/ Sprucefield; and by the A27 trunk road which runs from A3 Northway, Portadown and joins the A1 at Carnbane junction, Newry.

My officials are currently developing a new suite of transport plans, and the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) is the first in line for completion. It will set out future investment for our strategic transport networks, by road, rail and bus, and reflect my commitment to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across the North. Officials are continuing to make progress and I intend to publish the draft RSTNTP for public consultation in late 2021, with a view to issuing the finalised Plan in spring 2022. The public consultation on the RSTNTP will provide an opportunity for representations to be made, including improvements to these routes.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether her Department plans to keep the increased deployment of traffic attendants in Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn over all forthcoming public holidays or periods of good weather; and (ii) whether traffic attendants have been directed to Seapark and Kinnegar in Holywood to enforce illegal parking.

**(AQW 18060/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:**

- (i) The on-street enforcement was increased on 15 March 2021 in response to particular parking issues being highlighted. This has largely been possible due to the availability of Traffic Attendant (TA) resource, as I decided that the parking enforcement service should be scaled back due to traffic reductions in response to Covid restrictions. As we return to a 'normal' enforcement service these areas will be considered as part of our routine reassessment of the enforcement schedules within our available resource. It is however not practicable to schedule enforcement to take account of likely weather conditions.
- (ii) I am advised that TAs have visited Kinnegar on 6 occasions since mid-April 2021. There have been no recent requests to enforce in Seapark; however in response to your question, arrangements have been put in place for TAs to visit these locations.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's responsibility and enforcement role over parking on grass verges at the side of a road.

**(AQW 18061/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** There is no single piece of legislation that prohibits all vehicles from parking on footways or verges. However, where there are parking restrictions, these apply to the carriageway, footway and verge on that side of the road, and my Department can carry out enforcement action against vehicles that are parked in contravention of these restrictions. Article 30 of the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 also prohibits heavy commercial vehicles from parking on verges, central reservations and footways, although enforcement in this instance is a matter for the PSNI.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail any traffic calming measures that are required by her Department outside, or near, a primary school.

**(AQW 18063/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** There is no legal obligation to provide any form of traffic calming measures at schools, however, as Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I believe the provision of such features can be very beneficial. My Department can utilise a range of traffic calming measures outside a school such as traffic signs, which can come with flashing amber lights, road markings, coloured surfacing, 'school keep clear' markings, parking restrictions, and speed limits including part-time 20 mph limits as I am currently introducing at 103 schools. Other physical features, such as improved walking and cycling measures, controlled pedestrian crossings and, where appropriate, speed cushions or speed humps, can also be used.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the total length of cycle lanes, broken down by constituency.

**(AQW 18084/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not maintain records of cycling infrastructure on a constituency basis. However, comprehensive information is available for Belfast through the Sustrans Belfast Bike Life report. The 2019 report has identified all potential cycle lanes, cycleways and cycle paths throughout Belfast. This includes paths through parks which are the responsibility of Councils and other agencies.

For the Belfast area the length of cycle infrastructure is as follows:

On-road painted cycle lanes	49 km
Shared footway / cycleway	37 km
Cycle tracks physically separated from traffic and pedestrians	4 km
Traffic-free shared paths away from the road	63 km

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to outline any water supply and wastewater capacity issues that exist in the (a) Whitehead; (b) Islandmagee; (c) Ballygalley; (d) Milltown; (e) Glenarm; (f) Carnlough; (g) Glenariff; and (h) Cushendall areas; and (j) any other villages or settlements in East Antrim; and (ii) how Northern Ireland Water is working to resolve these capacity issues.

**(AQW 18085/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:**

- (i) NI Water has advised that no drinking water supply capacity issues have been identified in the East Antrim area. However, wastewater network and treatment capacity issues have been identified in parts of the Larne, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Greenisland, Ballycarry, Portglenone, Tully Road (Carnlough and Glenarm), Whitehead/Ballystrudder/Ballycarry, Cushendall and Cushendun wastewater treatment works.

In terms of resolving issues in the East Antrim area, NI Water plans to upgrade Larne waste water treatment works (WwTWs) and its sewer catchment (Larne / Blackcave) during the period covered by its Price Control - PC21 (April 2021 – March 2027). Current estimates are ca£30 million and the upgrade is subject to funding by the NI Executive of the PC21 Business Plan. Areas assessed as nearing capacity, by NI Water's sewerage network capacity mapping tool, are not in the PC21 business plan but may be subject to future PC27 (2027-2033) business planning prioritisation processes and funding. In areas where capacity is constraining development, NI Water can consider the provision of positive planning responses for these areas where developers can demonstrate:

- (ii) (1) like for like development, (2) extant previously approved development (where NI Water has given a positive response) and (3) where the development will offer a reduced loading on the sewer network, which may include storm separation and/or attenuation. In addition, NI Water has put in place a Solution Engineering Team which can assess options for storm water offsetting within a catchment that may be funded by developers to facilitate a proposed development.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what criteria is used when deciding to refresh double yellow no parking lines.

**(AQW 18114/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department's policy in relation to maintenance of road markings is that priority should be given to regulatory road markings which includes double yellow lines and other markings restricting parking on the carriageway.

Road markings are identified for refreshment/replacement as follows:

- a during cyclic maintenance inspections - where lines that have approximately 30% of the marked area is noted as ineffective or worn away;
- b in response to requests from traffic management officials or in response to public enquiries; and

- c where Traffic Attendants or the Department's Liaison Officer has noted a faded line and is of the opinion the restriction has worn to the point where a member of the public would not know what marking was there thus making it unenforceable.

If there is any specific location within your constituency where you are concerned about the quality of road markings then please contact my officials at;

DfI Roads - Belfast South Section Office, 1a Airport Road, Belfast, BT3 9DY.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following the erection of a new play park in the area, whether her Department will carry out an urgent assessment for traffic calming along Martins Lane, Newry in front of Springfarm Heights, Altmore Gardens and Loanda Crescent.

**(AQW 18130/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department recognises the importance of road safety measures and is committed to exploring solutions that deliver better for communities and improve lives across the North. In response to your request, I have asked my officials to undertake an initial technical assessment to determine if any additional road safety measures would be appropriate for this location.

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in order to ensure a credible alternative form of transport for commuters, whether she will establish an express rail service from Derry to Belfast.

**(AQW 18138/17-22)**

**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. I believe that rail has huge untapped potential to deliver multiple benefits across our island and I am committed to addressing regional imbalance by improving connectivity to the North West area. In line with this, I have commissioned a feasibility study to get Phase 3 of the Coleraine to Derry project back on track. I have also commissioned additional studies to explore the possibility of a half hourly service from Derry to Belfast as well as providing additional halts at Ballykelly, Strathfoyle and City of Derry Airport/Eglinton.

In respect of delivering an express rail service from Derry to Belfast, the current infrastructure does not support such a service due to the single track infrastructure presently in place. However, I believe that we can take a strategic view of these issues and the All Island Strategic Rail Review which I announced last month, along with Transport Minister Eamon Ryan TD, will allow also us to consider our network across this island to view how we can improve it for everyone. It reflects and builds on 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 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. 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. Whilst the outcome of this review is not yet determined, I can confirm that it will explore current service levels and, should the data support it, recommendations could come forward in respect of increasing service levels along corridors such as the Belfast to Derry line.

In addition to this review, my Department is also currently bringing forward the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) and, amongst other measures, this will consider improvements to our rail network. I am keen to examine how best to optimise the existing network through increased frequency of services and reduced journey times, whilst also looking at the practicalities of expanding the network. The Draft RSTNTP is scheduled for full public consultation in late 2021, and I am determined to use these Transport Plans to help power our Green Recovery. To that end, I would welcome your input to the consultation.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to launch a bike scheme, similar to the 26 counties, which will provide bicycles and e-bikes for those (i) on low incomes; and (ii) who are most disadvantaged.

**(AQW 18146/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am very keen to increase the proportion of journeys made by walking, cycling and public transport right across Northern Ireland and I want to do what I can to remove barriers for people who want to walk and cycle more as they go about their everyday lives.

To date, my focus has been about providing safer infrastructure and cleaner ways of travelling that better connect our communities. A number of different schemes have been announced in both the South and in England. In light of the pressures on my Resource budget, I want to monitor how successful these are in increasing the number of people cycling before investing significant resource in developing one here.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the evidence gathered by her Department on planning policy matters such as Sustainable Development in the countryside.

**(AQW 18147/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I recognise the importance of ensuring regional planning policy on a wide range of planning matters is kept under review based on the latest available evidence. You will be aware that, further to a 'Call for Evidence' and independent research, I announced my decision to review regional planning policy for Renewable and Low Carbon Energy on the 21 April 2021.

I have also carefully considered all of the evidence in relation to regional policy for Sustainable Development in the Countryside and the way forward for this policy area will be made clear shortly.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the relationship between her Department and local councils when progressing potential greenways and active travel routes.

**(AQW 18148/17-22)**

**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 schemes as part of a greenway network for the entire region. In the early stages, my Department provided funding to Councils, to assist them in undertaking feasibility studies and detailed designs, through the 'Small Grants for Greenways' programme.

In 2020/21, I also announced capital grant funding towards six greenway projects that were due to start construction and Councils were asked to develop their business cases for further schemes. My Walking and Cycling Champion has written to Councils seeking an update on greenway proposals that are progressing towards delivery and inviting Councils to submit business cases for any proposals that would be in a position to start construction. My Department continues to liaise with Councils in respect of the development of their business cases, in anticipation of providing further capital grant funding.

My Department considers that Councils are best placed to consult locally on their plans and to advance local community engagement (including stakeholders and landowners) to ensure the successful completion of their greenway projects.

In terms of other active travel routes and other active travel measures, I am keen to hear about Council priorities for their areas so that we can work together to deliver better places for people.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the drainage solutions her Department is focusing on outside of the greater Belfast area.

**(AQW 18149/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** In 2021/22, DfI Rivers plan for approximately 1,500 metres of culvert rehabilitation works to be completed outside the Greater Belfast area. In addition, DfI Rivers is progressing an extensive programme of capital flood alleviation projects outside of Greater Belfast, with numerous projects at various stages of the project lifecycle. It is intended to complete feasibility studies in Strabane, Limavady and Fintona and to continue with on-going design works for potential schemes in Portadown, Newry, Eglinton, Lurgan and Mayobridge. All projects are subject to competing priorities; availability of funding and economic viability.

Other projects of note are the Shimna River Flood Alleviation Scheme in Newcastle, and the Newry Phase 1 Tributaries work which are currently at the latter stages of procurement and intended to commence on site later this year. There are also active construction sites in Lisburn and Antrim to complete flood alleviation schemes this financial year.

My Department also carries out road drainage improvement works to remove surface water from carriageways and footways, which could potentially cause flooding. Almost £6.0m is spent annually on this activity of which over £5.0m on average, is spent outside Eastern Division – an area which covers Belfast City, Lisburn and Castlereagh.

My Department's Living With Water Programme (LWWP), is initially focusing on solutions for Belfast, but I am very keen to see the LWWP approach being extended to other parts of the North. This includes within Derry, where I allocated £130k from the 2020/21 budget to start the development of a LWWP feasibility study. This study initially focused on working with the designers of the A2 Buncrana Road Strategic Road Improvement scheme to bring forward integrated drainage solutions within the Skeoge River and Pennyburn Culvert catchments.

NI Water has advised of the drainage solutions proposed for outside of the Greater Belfast area in the period 2021-2027 and these are included in Table 1. These works are subject to the Price Control (PC) 21 Business Case being approved by the Utility Regulator and the funding being provided by the NI Executive.

**Table 1**

	<b>Draft Determination Response (Nominal)</b>
Project Name	PC21 £m DD
Dernaflaw DA Dernaflaw Sewerage	0.381
Annsborough DA UID-Mill Hill Castlewellan WwPS	0.419

	<b>Draft Determination Response (Nominal)</b>
Armagh DA - Storm Tanks	3.865
Ballymena DAP	7.685
Ballynahinch DAP	3.608
Ballyrickard DA Upper Crescent Comber WwPS	3.660
Ballywalter DA UID-Ballywalter Fowler 1 CSO	0.695
Larne DAP	4.857
Cookstown DAP	17.279
Culmore DAP	22.213
Downpatrick DAP	0.629
Dromore DAP	2.415
Dundrum DAP	3.320
Dungannon DAP	13.090
Enniskillen DAP	2.880
Kilkeel DAP	9.534
Killinchy DA - Inisharoan PS	1.965
Kircubbin DAP	0.617
Limavady DAP	4.974
Maghera DA UID-Largantogher Park CSO	1.091
Magherafelt DAP	0.378
Newry DAP	5.151
Newtownbreda DAP	11.636
North Coast DAP	5.983
North Down DA - KS873 Rathmore Stream UID	1.256
Portadown DAP	12.345
Portaferry DAP - Portaferry No 1 PS (North)	3.037
Strabane DA UID-Park Road CSO	0.769
Ballymagorry DA Ballymagorry Tyrone WwPS	1.637
Derryhale DAP	1.489
Donaghadee DA - Cotton WWPS	1.360
Donnybrewer DA Eglinton Cottage Way WwPS	1.327
Keady Armagh DA Annvale WwPS	1.412
Moirá DA Waringfield WwPS	1.246
Moy DA Keenaghan WwPS Upgrade	1.102
Rathfriland Drumlough DA Sleepy Valley Rathfriland WwPS	0.436
Tamnamore DA Clonmore Road Clonty clay WwPS	0.740
Bellaghy DA Ballyscullion Road WwPS, Bellaghy DG5	1.492
Bushmills DA - Preistland Road	0.078
Cranfield Catchment, Kilkeel Storm Separation	2.293
Londonderry DA Foyle Street Londonderry Sewer Upgrade	0.854
Newcastle DA Mourneview Sewerage	0.798
	161.999

DA	Drainage Area
DAP	Drainage Area Plan
UID	Unsatisfactory Intermittent Discharge
CSO	Combined Sewer Overflow
DG5	Properties at risk of internal flooding
WwPS	Wastewater Pumping Station

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail Translink's future capacity plan for buses and trains.  
(AQW 18150/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** Our public transport network is vital in our recovery from COVID-19 both economically and socially. I am really passionate about public transport and I believe it offers so much potential not just for daily commuting but also for tourism and to help address regional imbalance and tackle the climate emergency.

I am keen that we take a strategic view of the services that we deliver and to that end I have recently announced an All Island Strategic Rail review with Transport Minister, Eamon Ryan TD, which will allow also us to consider our network across this island to view how we can improve it for everyone. Reflecting and building on the commitments under the New Decade, New Approach agreement, the Review will also 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.

In addition, my Department is currently bringing forward the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) and, amongst other measures, this will consider improvements to our rail network. I am keen to examine how best to optimise the existing network through increased frequency of services and reduced journey times, whilst also looking at the practicalities of expanding the network. The Draft RSTNTP is scheduled for full public consultation in late 2021, and I am determined to use these Transport Plans to help power our Green Recovery.

In respect of capacity during COVID-19, with the further easing of restrictions allowing shops and other businesses to re-open, we will see more and more people visiting our towns and cities. This will see more passengers using our public transport services. Translink is currently running a "Ready for You" campaign across social media, radio and outdoor highlighting all the safety measures in place and reminding passengers to wear a face covering (unless exempt), observe good hand hygiene, follow social distancing measures and use cashless payment options where possible. Translink has also implemented a range of measures including having assist buses and trains on standby to increase capacity where needed as well as enhanced cleaning of buses and trains in addition to the regular daily cleaning that is undertaken for our public transport fleet. I hope those actions give the public confidence to return to public transport.

In respect of increasing the capacity of our network in the future, my Department is investing in excess of £60m in 21 new rail carriages. Once in operation, these new carriages will see an increase in capacity on our network of around 1,600 seats. This significant investment will not only enhance capacity on the network but also deliver multiple benefits across our island. It is vital that we continue to invest and modernise our rail network as we work to build back greener and more responsibly from Covid 19.

In respect of the bus network, I have committed £66m funding for the purchase of 145 low and zero emission vehicles by Translink over the next 2 years. Whilst these buses will replace older vehicles, it will improve the quality of the service we are delivering whilst lowering emissions significantly. It is anticipated the first of these new buses will go into service in Belfast and Derry in spring 2022.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail what her Department has spent on drainage maintenance in the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area in the last three years.  
(AQW 18152/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** DfI Rivers carries out cyclical inspection and maintenance of designated drainage infrastructure across the Lisburn and Castlereagh council area.

Works are undertaken on a watercourse catchment area basis which can cross council boundaries. In light of this, figures have been provided on a pro rata basis based on the percentage of the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area within my Department's Rivers Lisburn Rural operational area. The table below outlines the approximate pro rata expenditure on drainage maintenance by DfI Rivers within the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area.

Expenditure by DfI Roads and NI Water is also included in the table below. The figures for Roads include structural drainage and gully cleaning. Gully cleaning is performed by an external contractor.

Year	Expenditure by Rivers	Expenditure by Roads	Expenditure by NI Water
2018/19	£212k	£208k	£175k
2019/20	£241k	£137k	£241k
2020/21	£213k	£135k	£244k

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail any plans to reassess and revise her Department's policies post-COVID-19, in order to reflect changes in society where more people are moving toward rural areas.

**(AQW 18174/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department's policies are regularly reviewed to ensure they continue to be relevant and appropriate. The changes in society due to COVID-19 will be fully considered when individual policy reviews are being undertaken.

I am committed to delivering cleaner, greener and healthier communities as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. Providing safe routes that give people the freedom and confidence to walk, wheel and cycle as part of their everyday routine is one of the ways in which I hope to change the way we live for the better.

For example, in addition to pop-up cycle lanes in Belfast and pop-up cycle infrastructure on Foyle Riverside and Queens Quay in Derry, I have provided funding to support Councils in the construction of greenway schemes across Northern Ireland. I am keen to provide further capital funding through my Blue Green Infrastructure Fund to assist Councils to develop greenways that will provide walking and cycling links to rural areas.

I also contributed £5million to the DfC Covid 19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme which was allocated across Councils. This funding is being used for projects which improve connectivity by making it more attractive to walk and cycle to access key services and which protect and enhance our green and blue infrastructure.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much funding has been set aside by her Department and its arm's-length bodies to celebrate the Northern Ireland Centenary.

**(AQW 18181/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department and arm's length bodies have not set aside any funding to celebrate the Northern Ireland Centenary.

**Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the assessment criteria for the 20mph speed limit scheme outside schools; and (ii) the result of the assessment for Gaelscoil Eanna, North Belfast.

**(AQW 18186/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Details of the process for assessing and prioritising schools for the part-time 20mph speed limit programme are set out in Roads Service Policy and Procedure Guide (RSPPG) E070 details of which can be found at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/road-safety-schools-rsppg-e070>

I can confirm that Gaelscoil Eanna scored 96 points in the assessment process. Listed below are the seven schools in the Antrim and Newtownabbey Council area that were included in the recent first tranche of the programme which had scores ranging between 137 and 213 points:

- 1 Ballyclare High School, Ballyclare;
- 2 Duneane Primary School, Toome;
- 3 Edmund Rice College, Glengormley;
- 4 Groggan Primary School, Randalstown;
- 5 Loanends Primary School, Crumlin;
- 6 Mallusk Primary School, Newtownabbey; and
- 7 Moneynick Primary School, Toome.

It is my intention to take forward further tranches of part-time speed limits at schools and I can confirm that Gaelscoil Eanna Primary School will be considered for inclusion in future programmes, the scale and extent of which will be dependent on budget allocations.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are any plans to permit local council planning committees a greater degree of autonomy by removing the link between departmental legislation, the Strategic Planning Policy Statement published in September 2015 and the creation of local development plans.

**(AQW 18187/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The Planning Act (NI) 2011 requires councils to prepare local development plans for their areas. These must take account of the Regional Development Strategy and any policy or advice contained in guidance issued by the Department, which includes the regional policies set out in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement. The Planning Act also requires councils to submit their development plan documents for independent examination, where it will be determined if the document is sound. The soundness tests are set out in Departmental guidance and reflect the legislative provisions of the Planning Act.

The Planning Act, existing regional planning policy and guidance already provide councils with the flexibility to bring forward bespoke local policies for the development of their areas, where appropriate. Councils are able to develop their own approaches to dealing with the specific economic, social and environmental local circumstances which affect communities in their areas, through the preparation of their local development plans.

This approach reflects the transfer of local planning to councils and the creation of the two tier planning system brought forward by the Executive and agreed by the Assembly. There are no plans to change these arrangements.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the minimum legal distance between streetlights.  
(AQW 18210/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** Lighting installations are designed in accordance with Standard BS5489 Design of Road Lighting and there is no legal requirement in respect of the minimum distance between street lights.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how will she ensure that the Ulster Canal Greenway project from Middletown to Smithboro has the funding needed for full delivery.  
(AQW 18217/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I am pleased that my Department was able to support the Special EU Programmes Body issuing a Letter of Offer, to the consortium led by Waterways Ireland, for €4.9m to complete the Ulster Canal Greenway from the INTERREG VA Territorial Co-operation Programme by December 2021.

I understand that there have been both inflationary increases and increases in construction costs which have resulted in an additional funding request for the project. This is currently under consideration by the SEUPB.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has explored any potential revenue raising opportunities within her departmental property.  
(AQW 18218/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** My Department has consistently considered and operated a wide range of revenue raising opportunities on property that it owns. This includes, but is not limited to, opportunities to raise revenue through the disposal of surplus property and the rental of property and land acquired for any transport schemes and opportunities relating to the Crumlin Road Gaol.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's assessment on e-scooters.  
(AQW 18219/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** The position remains that it is illegal to use e-scooters on public roads and public spaces for rental or private use here and in GB.

DfT, in conjunction with local authorities, are running pilot e-scooter rental schemes in GB within designated areas. These schemes began in July last year and are still ongoing. The aim of the schemes, which do not extend to Northern Ireland, is to help assess the safety of e-scooters and their impact on public spaces. I have asked my officials to monitor these schemes, and once an analysis is available, to provide me with a report. I will then be in a position to give consideration to the future legal position of e-scooters here.

**Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to booking driving tests, why are nurses not counted as critical workers.  
(AQW 18242/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** Following the Executive's decision on 15 April to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place.

The DVA has received a number of requests from key workers requesting that they reinstate a priority service for them to avail of early appointments. The DVA continues to work with the Department of Health on priority applications for key workers whose jobs are ancillary to medical, health or social care services and who need to drive for their work. If a critical worker, including a nurse, meets these requirements, their employer must contact the DVA and identify staff in these priority groups. The DVA will then try to make priority appointments for both theory and practical driving tests. The DVA are not in a position to consider any applications that do not meet the above criteria.

Following the phased reopening of the practical driving test booking service based on the expiry dates of theory test pass certificates, to give priority to those who have been waiting the longest time, I am pleased to confirm that the booking service for practical driving tests opened for all customers on 10 May 2021, providing everyone with a valid theory test pass certificate with equal opportunity to book a driving test.

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 from now until the end of August and bookings for September and October have been released to accommodate more learners.



Driver theory testing has resumed at the six established test centres, with additional slots at each location and extended opening hours being provided 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, however, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times and I would ask customers for their continued patience.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the current law on the use of powered wheelchairs and mobility scooters on footpaths and roads.

**(AQW 18280/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As Minister with responsibility for safe travel, and road safety in particular, 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 (from the Highway Code) can be found on the NI Government website (nidirect) covering the use of powered wheelchairs and mobility scooters (called Invalid Carriages in law) which sets out what is legally required to use them on public roads and footpaths, at the following link:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/rules-users-powered-wheelchairs-and-mobility-scooters-36-46>

**Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the current practical driving test booking system that has prevented members of the public from booking a retest immediately after a test fail, despite the availability of test slots.

**(AQW 18282/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Following the Executive's decision on 15 April to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests on 23 April 2021.

In January, I announced that bookings for driving tests would 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. Phase one, for those customers whose theory test pass certificates will expire by 31 October 2021, opened on 26 April. Phase two, for those customers whose theory test pass certificates will expire by 31 March 2022, opened on 4 May 2021.

To ensure the process for booking driving tests was managed fairly, those customers who failed their test, since the service resumed on 23 April, were not provided with the option to book another test before other customers were given the opportunity to book a test for the first time. The only exception was for those customers who were assessed as a key worker before the scheme closed in October 2020, who under arrangements at that time, were entitled to book a second test.

The key worker priority process has been reviewed and the DVA will now consider the facilitation 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. However, this approach is based on engagement with the relevant employers, rather than with the individual learners, to provide the DVA with a list of any relevant staff that fall within this priority group.

I am pleased to confirm that the booking service opened for all customers on 10 May 2021, providing everyone with a valid theory test pass certificate with equal opportunity to book a driving test, whether for the first time or after a test failure.

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 from now until the end of August and bookings for September and October have been released to accommodate more learners.

I remain committed to minimising disruption and ensuring the DVA's plan for the restoration of services is in hand, however, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times and I would ask customers for their continued patience.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an indicative spend on the Shared Island Fund.

**(AQW 18283/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I welcome the Shared Island Fund, established by the Department of the Taoiseach in December 2020, which will foster new investment and development opportunities on a North/South basis and support the delivery of key cross-border infrastructure initiatives.

Engagement, dialogue and a comprehensive programme of research across the island is informing future Shared Island Fund priorities and spend, but any decisions on spend from this fund are matters for the Irish Government.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to outline any plans to install further bicycle repair stations, like that on the Lagan Towpath; and (ii) to detail any locations being considered or local councils being engaged.

**(AQW 18288/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Revenue Earned from On Street Parking Charges and Penalty Charge Notices

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the amounts of revenue earned from (i) on street parking charges; and (ii) penalty charge notices in the controlled parking zones in (a) Belfast; (b) Lisburn; and (c) Newry, in each of the last three financial years.

**(AQW 18318/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not hold details of revenue received from Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued in Controlled Parking Zones (CPZs). This is because many streets are only partly located in a CPZ, and PCNs do not record where exactly on the street they were issued.

Details of revenue received from on-street parking charges in the Belfast, Lisburn and Newry CPZs for the last three financial years, are provided in the table below:

Year	Controlled Parking Zones - Revenue		
	Belfast	Lisburn	Newry
2018/19	3,057k	333k	485k
2019/20	2,975k	314k	487k
2020/21	1,208k	184k	237k

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the reliance on shift work and issues around fatigue across the Health and Social Care workforce as vital services are restored, what proposals is she bringing forward to speed up access to priority driving tests for these workers.

**(AQW 18324/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Following the Executive's decision on 15 April to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place.

The DVA continues to work with the Department of Health on priority applications for key workers whose jobs are ancillary to medical, health or social care services and who need to drive for their work. If a critical worker meets these requirements, their employer must contact the DVA and identify staff in these priority groups. The DVA will then try to make priority appointments for both theory and practical driving tests. The DVA are not in a position to consider any applications that do not meet the above criteria.

Following the phased reopening of the practical driving test booking service based on the expiry dates of theory test pass certificates, to give priority to those who have been waiting the longest time, I am pleased to confirm that the booking service for practical driving tests opened for all customers on 10 May 2021, providing everyone with a valid theory test pass certificate with equal opportunity to book a driving test.

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 from now until the end of August and bookings for September and October have been released to accommodate more learners.

Driver theory testing has resumed at the six established test centres, with additional slots at each location and extended opening hours being provided 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, however, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times and I would ask customers for their continued patience.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when consideration will be given to additional schools in East Belfast being identified for the application of the 20mph speed limit zones.

**(AQW 18335/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I was pleased to have been able to commit funding within the capital budget towards the introduction of part-time 20mph speed limits at 103 schools across Northern Ireland, so that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and

from school on a daily basis. Priority listings have been developed for each Division based on scores calculated using the assessment framework contained within the Department's current road safety at schools policy document.

Given the restricted budgets for works of this nature, as well as the practicalities of delivery, it was necessary to limit the first tranche of schools to around 100 in this year's programme. I am pleased to be able to confirm that Leadhill Primary School, Loughview Primary School and Knocknagoney Primary School in East Belfast have all been included in the first tranche which is due for completion by the end of the current school year.

I can confirm that it is my intention to take forward further tranches of part-time speed limits at schools and that the remaining schools within the East Belfast area will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has any plans to introduce 20mph speed limits as the standard for residential areas.

**(AQW 18342/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I recognise that appropriate speed limits are part of the solution, and I firmly believe that attitudes to speeding have to change. My Department has introduced 20mph limits at over 700 locations, mostly in residential areas in conjunction with traffic engineering measures, such as road humps.

The Department ran two trials on 20mph speed limits, one using signs only 20mph speed limits, and the other using a new arrangement of signs to introduce part-time 20mph speed limits at schools.

The report on the enforceable 20mph speed limits without traffic calming measures found that this approach had little or no impact on the speed of traffic. The Department therefore has no current plans to introduce 20 mph speed limits to all residential areas but will continue to provide 20mph zones with traffic calming, as these are much more effective at reducing speeds. Previous studies show an average reduction in mean speeds of 9 mph.

I also intend to introduce part-time 20 mph speed limits outside more schools given the strong support for the 103 schools included in the first tranche of my programme.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of how long it will take her Department to implement all outstanding requests for traffic calming measures in the Eastern Division under current guidelines and procedures.

**(AQW 18343/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Officials within DfI Roads Eastern Division have a list of requests for traffic calming measures, which currently comprises 598 locations. This list is 'live' and is kept under continuous review.

Although an assessment is carried out and a priority ranking is provided for each location, not every location is in serious need of attention, or suitable for traffic calming measures. Also, scheme priorities can change upwards or downwards, subject to the consideration of assessment data and therefore it is more appropriate to focus on the top twenty priority ranked locations in taking forward schemes to detailed design.

A typical traffic calming scheme is estimated to cost around £50k, however actual costs depend on the nature and scale of the individual scheme. The rate at which the traffic calming programme is taken forward will depend upon budgets made available in future years for works of this nature.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail how many current requests for traffic calming measures in the Eastern Division could be alleviated by the implementation of a standard 20mph speed limit in residential areas.

**(AQW 18344/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I recognise that appropriate speed limits are part of the solution, and I firmly believe that attitudes to speeding have to change. My Department has introduced 20mph limits at over 700 locations, mostly in residential areas in conjunction with traffic engineering measures, such as road humps.

The Department ran a trial on 'sign only' 20mph speed limits without traffic calming measures which found that this approach had little or no impact on the speed of traffic. The introduction of 20 mph speed limits in residential areas would therefore not alleviate the current requests for traffic calming.

My Department plans to continue to provide 20mph zones with traffic calming, as these are much more effective at reducing speeds, with previous studies showing an average reduction in mean speeds of 9 mph. I also intend to introduce part-time 20 mph speed limits outside more schools given the strong support for the 103 schools included in the first tranche of my programme.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what research underpins the statement at paragraph 15 of her Department's consultation paper on the review of the implementation of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 which states that there is no evidence to suggest this is the time for another fundamental re-examination of the planning system.

**(AQW 18348/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My view that this is not the time for another fundamental re-examination of the planning system is formed from my ongoing observations and advice on the operation of the planning system and from engagement with key stakeholders.

It has only been 6 years since the planning system was fundamentally reformed in 2015 with the transfer of responsibility for most local planning decisions and plan making going to new local councils, as well as significant reforms to the development management and plan making processes. It is my view that the new system is still 'bedding-down', as the Department, councils and key stakeholders become more familiar with their new planning roles and responsibilities. I do not, therefore, consider that this is the time for further fundamental change.

However, I am keen to use the Review of the Implementation of the 2011 Planning Act to bring forward practical and effective fixes and improvements to the current system as quickly as possible. I will, of course, carefully review all responses to the recent call for evidence and any other relevant material and remain open to consider any improvements and changes that are necessary to the planning system.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she could provide a copy of the most recent traffic assessment of the Crieve Road, Newry.  
**(AQW 18352/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department recognises the importance of road safety measures and is committed to exploring solutions that deliver better for communities and improve lives across the North.

My Department does not normally provide copies of internal working documents including traffic assessments. However, I can confirm that the most recent assessment was completed in August 2020 and a footway scheme at this location remains under consideration for possible inclusion in a future works programme.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether the detailed options paper is now complete for pedestrian facilities at the McDonald's restaurant on McKinsty Road, Belfast; (ii) whether her Department has now considered the options; and (iii) to detail the timescales for this work to commence.

**(AQW 18366/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As you are aware my officials from DfI Roads Eastern Division have commissioned a feasibility study on options to improve pedestrian facilities in the vicinity of the new McDonald's restaurant, at the McKinsty Road Roundabout, Derriaghy.

I can confirm that my officials have received an initial report and the consultants are now working on more detailed options.

After the study has been completed and options considered, my Department will then be in a position to advise on possible improvement works and the likely timescales. It is expected that the more detailed findings of this study will be available around the end of June 2021.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what large resurfacing patch schemes are planned for the Bangor area in the current financial year.

**(AQW 18368/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The 2020/21 resurfacing programme for the Ards and North Down Council area will be finalised once I have taken decisions on my Department's opening budget allocation. Once finalised, details of schemes will be included in the DfI Roads Spring report presented to Ards and North Down District Council prior to general release.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider using driving instructors to help ease the driving test waiting lists.

**(AQW 18369/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Following the Executive's decision on 15 April 2021 to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place.

The DVA has considered using Approved Driving Instructors to conduct driving tests but unfortunately this is not a viable option. Driving instructors would require the same level of training to become driving examiners as any new recruit to the DVA. In addition, Directive 2006/126/EC, Article 10, Annex IV, Clause 2.1(e) states that a driving examiner may not be active as a commercial driving instructor in a driving school simultaneously. This means that driving instructors cannot also act as driving examiners. Furthermore, in order to maintain mutual recognition of the driving licence going forwards, the driving test needs to be delivered by examiners who have completed the initial qualification set out in Directive 2006/126/EC, commonly referred to as the 3rd EU Directive.

Following the phased reopening of the practical driving test booking service based on the expiry dates of theory test pass certificates, to give priority to those who have been waiting the longest time, I am pleased to confirm that the booking service for practical driving tests opened for all customers on 10 May 2021, providing everyone with a valid theory test pass certificate with equal opportunity to book a driving test.

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 from now until the end of August and bookings for September and October have been released to accommodate more learners.

I remain committed to minimising disruption and ensuring the DVA's plan for the restoration of services is in hand, however, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times and I would ask customers for their continued patience.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what resurfacing road schemes are planned for the Bangor area for the current financial year.

**(AQW 18370/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I refer to my answer to your related question (AQW 18368/17-22).

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what large resurfacing patch schemes are planned for the (i) Donaghadee; and (ii) Millisle areas for the current financial year.

**(AQW 18371/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I refer to my answer to your related question (AQW 18368/17-22).

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail this year's spending plan for the Southern Roads Division.

**(AQW 18372/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Budget allocations and associated work programmes for Roads Southern Division for 2021-22 will be finalised following my decisions on the Department's opening budget allocation. Once finalised, details of schemes will be included in the DfI Roads Spring reports presented to the various Councils prior to general release.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has engaged with colleagues across this island regarding the EU replacement funds set up by the British government, including the absence of a north - south dimension.

**(AQW 18376/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Minister Ryan and I and our respective departments continue to work closely co- on EU funding related matters. This cooperation was discussed and welcomed at the recent Transport Sectoral meeting of the North South Ministerial Council held on 5 May 2021.

I am also pleased that, as a result of this collaboration, and collaboration with the Department for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the draft PEACE PLUS Programme which recently went out to consultation included transport and waste water infrastructure investment areas proposing an allocation of approximately €197m towards north-south projects.

My Department will continue to make the case for a north-south dimension to be included within any replacement funding programmes set up by the British government.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has plans to review the current policy for parking in housing estates.

**(AQW 18378/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I understand that this question relates to RSPPG E053 - Car Parking Facilities in Existing Social Housing Estates. My Department is not generally responsible for the provision of parking at residential properties, however as particular traffic progression issues were occurring in older (typically pre-1960s) social housing estates, an agreement was reached with the Housing Executive. During 2007, the Northern Ireland Housing Council asked the then Department to carry out a review of the policy, and subsequently RSPPG E053 was introduced in 2011.

It can be viewed at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/car-parking-facilities-existing-social-housing-estates-rsppg-e053>

I am advised that no amendments are considered necessary to this policy.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given it has been in existence since 2011, what work has been done to amend the policy on parking in housing estates.

**(AQW 18379/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department is not generally responsible for the provision of parking at residential properties, however as particular traffic progression issues were occurring in older (typically pre-1960s) social housing estates, an agreement was reached with the Housing Executive. During 2007, The Northern Ireland Housing Council asked the then Department to carry out a review of the policy, and subsequently RSPPG E053 - Car Parking Facilities in Existing Social Housing Estates was introduced in 2011. It can be viewed at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/car-parking-facilities-existing-social-housing-estates-rsppg-e053>

I am advised that no amendments has been made to this policy since its introduction, and none are considered necessary.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) any further measures she is considering for Portrush and Portstewart in relation to traffic calming measures, beyond those already announced, in order to mitigate the negative consequences of car cruises in the towns; and (ii) the latest conversations she has had with the various stakeholders involved in this issue.

**(AQW 18407/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department has recently installed traffic calming measures, in the form of road humps, on Lansdowne Road in Portrush with the aim of limiting vehicle speeds and improving pedestrian safety. I understand that senior officials from Northern Division are also engaging with PSNI, and met with the District Commander as recently as 7 May 2021, to discuss a number of traffic related issues in the area including exploring the possibility of implementing additional traffic calming measures in Portstewart and Portrush.

Driver and Vehicle Agency technical officers also work closely with the police and carry out inspections on modified cars stopped by Police in the Portrush and Portstewart areas which can result in the issuing of Prohibition Notices to drivers or immediate bans from use on our roads due to dangerous defects.

As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I am committed to working collaboratively with all partners to ensure that we can reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I am committed to ensuring that my officials in the DVA continue to support the PSNI, and other agencies, to conduct compliance checks on vehicles using our roads, taking the appropriate enforcement action as required.

I also look forward to the outcome of a noise camera trial commissioned by the Department for Transport in GB and how this exciting new technology could potentially alleviate the negative consequences of car cruises and help us lead the way in making our towns and cities quieter throughout Northern Ireland.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how the cycling, walking and roads infrastructure is to be developed to maximise the potential of the £36 million investment by Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council in the Dundonald International Ice Bowl.

**(AQW 18432/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As a statutory consultee to the planning authorities, my Department was consulted on the planning application for the proposed redevelopment of Dundonald International Ice Bowl.

In assessing the transport impacts of this planning application, my Department considered that the site is already well served by the existing public road network, pedestrian footways and public transport services and that adequate parking facilities will be provided for patrons. Furthermore a shared footway/cycleway to be provided within the site will connect to a new pedestrian/cycle bridge that will provide a direct connection to the Comber Greenway nearby and this will enable residents and visitors to access the Dundonald Leisure Park by walking, running, wheeling or cycling along this safe and traffic-free link.

Between 2017 and 2019, my Department spent £520k on works to resurface and widen over 7km of the Comber Greenway and are currently considering a number of other possible enhancements. My Department also provided substantial grant funding to Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council for the new pedestrian / cycle bridge. Given the measures proposed, I do not consider it necessary for my Department to provide additional transport infrastructure for the proposed redevelopment of the Dundonald International Ice Bowl.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Transport Plan for Belfast.

**(AQW 18434/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department is currently developing a new suite of Transport Plans which includes the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP). This will address future plans for roads, public transport and active travel within the five councils whose spatial area falls within the Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area (BMUA).

My officials are currently engaged with the five Councils which includes Belfast City Council, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, Ards and North Down Borough Council, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, and Mid and East Antrim District Council. The new BMTP aims to maximise integration between the Department's transport planning and the Councils' land use planning process. A key element will be to ensure that, as far as possible, new development is planned to make use of sustainable modes of transport and that major new transport infrastructure is planned to deal with current and future travel demand, in line with government and councils' outcomes.

A Belfast Metropolitan Transport Study (BMTS), which includes individual Transport Studies for each Council area, has been published on my Department's website. The BMTS set out an objective evidence-based assessment of current and future transport issues in the context of the Councils' growth ambitions.

The BMTP will be integrated with the formal Local Development Plan processes, so the timescales for completing the Draft Plan and its release for public consultation are still under review. However, work on the next phase of the BMTP is ongoing, and I am determined that the Transport Plan for Belfast will take account of the shared objectives for our towns and cities within the Greater Belfast area, and will deliver reduced levels of commuting by private car and greater use of sustainable modes of transport including public transport, walking and cycling.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) why her Department, as a partner in the All-Ireland Pollinator Scheme, does not have a proposed programme to re-wild all existing road verges and central reserves; and (ii) whether her Department has any plans to introduce such a programme in the current financial year.

**(AQW 18447/17-22)**

**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, my department is committed to reviewing its environmental policies to promote pollinator-friendly practices and to encourage their inclusion on road schemes, where practicable.

At present my Department does not have a proposed programme to re-wild existing road-verges and central reserves, or plans to create this within the financial year. 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.

Relevant AIPP actions are already 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 200,000m<sup>2</sup> 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.

At a local level action is also being taken, my officials continue to work with councils across the North to identify potential sites for to re-wild all existing roadside areas and central reserves and roadside areas which could be managed under a wild flower regime, "Don't Mow, let it grow". These areas need to be considered understanding road safety concerns and workforce priorities.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure why her Department will provide wildflower seeding for only 200,000 square metres of the 25.5km A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe dualling scheme.

**(AQW 18448/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The landscaping for the A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe dualling scheme was considered as part of the Environmental Assessment, which was further developed during detailed design of the scheme. The amount of wildflower seeding being provided on the A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe dualling scheme also takes account of other landscape objectives such as screening, integration and protection of the existing landscape character.

In addition to the wildflower seeding, the scheme will also incorporate approximately 800,000 square metres of native woodland and shrub planting, and approximately 80,000m of native hedgerow planting.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail where new dropped kerbs are under consideration for the Bangor area.

**(AQW 18461/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I can confirm that my officials are currently developing plans for the delivery of a range of Local Transport and Safety Measures, including dropped kerbs for the Ards and North Down Council area.

When the budget is confirmed, the annual works programme will be finalised with details included in the annual DfI Roads report provided to Ards and North Down Council, before it is published online.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will prioritise or apply selection criteria to people on the driving test waiting list.

**(AQW 18502/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Following the Executive's decision on 15 April to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place.

The reopening of the practical driving test booking service was phased, based on the expiry dates of theory test pass certificates, to give priority to those who have been waiting the longest time. I am pleased to confirm that following this, the booking service for practical driving tests opened for all customers on 10 May 2021, providing everyone with a valid theory test pass certificate with equal opportunity to book a driving test.

The DVA is also continuing to work with the Department of Health on priority applications for key workers whose jobs are ancillary to medical, health or social care services and who need to drive for their work. If a critical worker meets these requirements, their employer must contact the DVA and identify staff in these priority groups. The DVA will then try to make priority appointments for both theory and practical driving tests. The DVA are not in a position to consider any applications that do not meet the above criteria.

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 from now until the end of August and bookings for September and October have been released to accommodate more learners. Driver theory testing has resumed at the six established test centres, with additional slots at each location and extended opening hours being provided 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, however, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times and I would ask customers for their continued patience.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many parking tickets have been issued for Church Road and Fort Road in Helens Bay, over the last three month period.

**(AQW 18531/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** There were 133 Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued on Church Road, and no PCNs issued on Fort Road, during the months of February, March and April 2021.

**Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider the resurfacing of the Draperstown to Desertmartin road.

**(AQW 18641/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The B40 Draperstown Road to Desertmartin road is approximately 8 km long. In 2019 a 1.8km stretch, from the A29 Tobermore Road junction to the U5198 Nutgrove Road, was resurfaced. A further 2.1km section, from the U5204 Drumard Road to U5197 Brackalislea Road, is included in the 2021/22 resurfacing programme.

When this year's scheme is complete, approximately 50% of the B40 between Draperstown and Desertmartin will have been resurfaced since 2019. Any further resurfacing will be prioritised alongside other competing schemes in the district for inclusion in future works programmes.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department is responding to problems being experienced with the online booking systems for driving tests since it was fully reopened on 10 May.

**(AQW 18645/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The Driver and Vehicle Agency's (DVA) driving test booking system opened to all customers at 10am, Monday 10 May. As anticipated, there was significant demand for bookings and while there were some technical issues, which resulted in the queue being paused for a short period of time, these were quickly resolved. The online booking service remains open and I am pleased that thousands of customers have successfully booked an appointment. The queue management system will remain in place to manage the demand and keep the system working.

I remain committed to minimising disruption and ensuring the DVA's plan for the restoration of services is in hand, however, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand and I would ask customers for their continued patience.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the development of a new Road Safety Strategy.

**(AQW 18715/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Work on the Road Safety Strategy had been impacted by the Covid-19 crisis and the prioritisation of resources to the work on the Financial Assistance Schemes, however officials continue to work on it at pace.

In developing the new Road Safety Strategy, officials will engage with key stakeholders in advance of a formal consultation. The draft Road Safety Strategy will be issued as soon as possible but I can assure you that road safety is integral to the work of the Department and it continues each and every day with initiatives such as the 20 mph scheme at schools; the road safety grant scheme; the introduction of tougher penalties for mobile phone use while driving; and enforcement actions by the DVA, in collaboration with the PSNI. There are also regular meetings with the Chief Constable on road safety.

## Department of Justice

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice whether the Paramilitary Crime Multi-Agency Taskforce has met to discuss the antisocial behaviour throughout Northern Ireland relating to protests against the Irish Sea Border.

**(AQW 17781/17-22)**



**Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice):** The PCTF is an operational multi-agency task force which has a dedicated focus on paramilitary groups and associated criminality. It consists of PSNI, HMRC and NCA. The PCTF, as a law enforcement structure, is fully sighted on the wider policing response to recent public disorder.

The priorities of the Paramilitary Crime Task Force is an operational matter for the Chief Constable and I respect the Chief Constable's operational independence on this matter. Any questions regarding discussions between the partners in the PCTF should be directed to the Chief Constable.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice (i) to detail the number of SID (Speed Indicator Devices) that have been deployed across Northern Ireland by Police and Community Safety Partnerships by Council area, and (ii) whether she will review the data being captured by the temporary SID Signs to develop a permanent solution.

**(AQW 17843/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) are funded jointly by the Department of Justice and the Northern Ireland Policing Board in each of the eleven Council areas. They work to prioritise local community safety concerns within their areas and produce annual action plans to deliver practical solutions to address these.

In recent years, road safety has increasingly been identified as a local community safety issue in many areas. In response, PCSPs have commissioned and delivered school-based and youth-targeted road safety education and awareness raising initiatives. Following growing concern over excessive speed on local roads, PCSPs have also helped fund the introduction and deployment of Speed Indicator Devices (SIDs).

Working in partnership with local PSNI and Department for Infrastructure (DfI) personnel, PCSPs have provided a total of 98 static and 34 mobile SIDs. A list of PCSP-provided SIDs by Council area is provided in the attached table.

The data captured by these devices is governed and shared locally with the PCSP, PSNI, DfI and relevant community organisations. Following analysis, the data is used by the PSNI to identify traffic patterns and informs the deployment of enforcement teams. The data can also be beneficial to DfI when they are considering where to place new traffic calming measures.

SIDs are a useful tool as part of the broader panoply of measures used to improve road safety outcomes. They also help foster positive engagement between the PCSP, police and local communities. Any longer plan to further enhance road safety would be the policy responsibility of DfI.

**PCSP Speed Indicator Devices by Council area.**

PCSP	Static	Mobile
Antrim and Newtownabbey	13	1
Ards and North Down	6	1
Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	11	4
Belfast	----	4
Causeway Coast and Glens	8	8
Derry and Strabane	----	6
Fermanagh and Omagh	----	3
Lisburn and Castlereagh	22	----
Mid and East Antrim	----	7
Mid Ulster	24	----
Newry Mourne and Down	14	----
<b>Total</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>34</b>

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Justice (i) how community groups in Derry's Creggan and Bogside areas are chosen for consultation; and (ii) on what basis the Creggan Community Forum is recognised as a representative and inclusive cross-community organisation.

**(AQW 17900/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Any public consultation undertaken by the Department of Justice is published online and advertised in the normal manner: representations are welcome from anyone who wishes to respond. In the case of more targeted consultations, those with particular interest or expertise may be invited to participate in the process. No consultations specific to the Creggan or Bogside are being or have been recently undertaken by my Department.

Registration and/or accreditation of community organisations is generally a matter for Local Government and the Department for Communities. I understand that Creggan Community Forum brings together a wide range of interests from the area including community, schools, sports, youth workers and business.

Both I and my officials met with the Forum in recent weeks, along with local MLAs who requested the meeting. We also recently met with others in the wider Derry City & Strabane area including the Mayor of Derry City & Strabane, Brian Tierney, other elected representatives from across the City, including in the Waterside area, as well as a number of community development workers, youth workers and school Principals.

Our engagement at this time is focused on joining up efforts across Government and ensuring that those efforts are appropriately targeted to advance our Departmental objectives. Any representations on how that can be best achieved are welcomed.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) who is responsible for the regulation of Drones in Northern Ireland; (ii) the number of complaints received by the PSNI for inappropriate drone activity during 2019/2020 and 2020/2021; and (iii) how she intends to promote better understanding of the regulation of drone use.

**(AQW 17932/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The Air Navigation Order 2016 requires anyone who controls or flies a drone outdoors to register with the Civil Aviation Authority and places restrictions on the use of small unmanned aircraft. Civil aviation is a reserved matter and is the responsibility of The Department for Transport in Westminster whom you may wish to write to directly on this matter.

You may also wish to engage directly with PSNI regarding the number of complaints received relating to the use of drones and note that information on drones is readily available on the PSNI website via the following link:

[https://www.psnipolice.uk/advice\\_information/drones---small-unmanned-aircraft/drone-faqs/](https://www.psnipolice.uk/advice_information/drones---small-unmanned-aircraft/drone-faqs/)

**Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Justice to outline what her Department is doing to support the PSNI with additional funding for the security of officers and their families.

**(AQW 17952/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The safety and security of police officers and their families are of paramount importance to my Department, the Policing Board and, of course, the Chief Constable and resources are available to police officers who are facing direct threats and intimidation. I recently met with the Secretary of State and we discussed the general security situation and the types of challenges that the PSNI is currently facing.

Following the confirmation of the PSNI's final budget allocation for 2021-22, which is still subject to debate and vote by the Assembly, there has been an additional in-year allocation of £12.3 million. Decisions on the prioritisation of resources allocated to PSNI are ultimately a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

I remain fully committed to working with Executive Colleagues, including the Minister of Finance, and the Chief Constable to ensure we have a police service that is properly resourced in all aspects for the challenges it faces.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on (i) steps she is taking to prevent cases of child human trafficking in Northern Ireland; (ii) the number of charges of child human trafficking in Northern Ireland in the last five years; and (iii) current support available for victims of child human trafficking.

**(AQW 17987/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Equipping Northern Ireland to identify and eradicate modern slavery and human trafficking is a key priority for me as Justice Minister and my Department will shortly publish the 2021/22 Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Strategy which sets out key actions to pursue offenders; protect victims, including child victims; and prevent trafficking in all its forms. The latest annual strategy reflects views expressed during the consultation for greater visibility of children's issues, which will also be considered further in the development of a longer term three year strategy, subject to approval of relevant provisions in the forthcoming Justice Bill.

Delivery of strategic objectives requires close cooperation with other key agencies and non-statutory partners. The PSNI and Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCs), have operational responsibility for the investigation of all forms of child abuse, including human trafficking, and ensuring the effective protection of children. These organisations are represented on the DoJ Organised Crime Task Force subgroup on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking, a forum in which partners identify and respond to issues of concern. The PSNI has recently reviewed and updated training material to ensure that front line officers are better able to recognise the potential risk factors in a human trafficking case and the indicators of potential trafficking of children.

In relation to charges, I am advised that while cases are pursued and in some instances other offences prosecuted, there have not been any charges brought in relation to human trafficking offences in respect of children in the past five years in Northern Ireland. The Public Prosecution Service is currently consulting on its revised Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking. The consultation ends on 13th May 2021. The consultation can be found at:

<https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/publications/policy-prosecuting-cases-modern-slavery-and-human-trafficking-draft-consultation>

In Northern Ireland the number of children who enter the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is low, in comparison with other areas in the UK. The latest available figures show that 128 potential victims were identified in Northern Ireland in 2020; 99 were adults; 20 were children; and 9 of unknown age. The majority of children who enter the National Referral Mechanism are unaccompanied separated children potentially seeking asylum. However these children are quite often exploited in other countries on their journey to Northern Ireland. The Health and Social Care Board commissions Barnardos to deliver the Independent Guardian Service in line with Section 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice Support for Victims) Act (NI) 2015.

The Working Arrangements for the Welfare and Safeguarding of Child Victims and Potential Child Victims of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking have been produced by the HSCB and PSNI, in consultation with DoJ and DoH. These arrangements set out the pathways for supporting child victims, which are delivered through existing provision by the Health and Social Care Trusts. The arrangements note that any child or young person who is known or suspected to be a victim of human trafficking or modern slavery is by definition a child in need of protection and should be subject of an investigation under the provisions of Article 66 of the Children Order (a child protection investigation). A needs assessment is conducted in such cases and an Independent Guardian is appointed to represent the child's best interests. The document can be found at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/working-arrangements-potential-child-victims-of-human-trafficking-and-modern-slavery.pdf>

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice to provide a breakdown of money that her Department has invested in the triangle area of the Waterside, Foyle, over the past 5 years.

**(AQW 18139/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** My Department has made no specific investment in the triangle area of the Waterside, Foyle, over the past 5 financial years from 2016-17 to 2020-21; however, my Department provides funding to a number of organisations in the Voluntary and Community sector who provide services throughout Northern Ireland, including the Foyle Constituency. Records are not kept in a manner that would make it possible to break funding down into the format requested.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Justice how much funding has been set aside by her Department and its arm's-length bodies to celebrate the Northern Ireland Centenary.

**(AQW 18182/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** No funding has been set aside by my Department and its arm's-length bodies to celebrate the Northern Ireland Centenary.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Justice to outline (i) the powers the police have relating to drinking in public places; and (ii) whether consideration has been given to reviewing the effectiveness of these powers.

**(AQW 18202/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Police powers to curb on street drinking are manifested in a number of different pieces of legislation. The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 gives district councils the power to make bye-laws prohibiting consumption of intoxicating liquor in public places. Once an area is designated, it is an offence to consume alcohol in that area. This legislation provides police and council officers the power to take the name and address of offenders for consideration of prosecution, although it is the Council who proceed with that prosecution and there is no power to remove alcohol from individuals. The Department for Communities (DfC) has responsibility for this legislation.

Part 5, Articles 68 – 72, of the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008, brought forward on behalf of the then Department of Social Development, now DfC, aimed to address the lack of power to remove alcohol in the existing bye-law system. These provisions were intended to allow for the seizure of open containers which contain, or had at any time contained, intoxicating liquor in designated areas. Subsequent legal advice has confirmed these provisions do not contain any power to seize alcohol and consequently Articles 68 - 72 of the Order have not yet been commenced.

In the meantime, the Department of Justice has provided police with additional powers, via the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, to issue fixed penalty notices for a number of public order offences related to public drinking including being drunk in a public place, indecent behaviour, disorderly behaviour and behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace.

With regards to young people, police have powers under the Confiscation of Alcohol (Young Persons) Act 1997, allowing them to request the surrender of alcohol from under 18's and for the disposal of alcohol surrendered. Again there is no power to seize alcohol although failure to comply with this request is an offence which may lead to arrest.

A review of the effectiveness of on street drinking legislation, including Part 5 of the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008 and Council byelaws, is included in the current ASB Legislation Review on which my Department leads a multi-agency Delivery Group. My officials are engaging with the PSNI and DfC, as the Department with overarching responsibility for alcohol legislation, with a view to ensuring relevant legislation is appropriate to address this issue.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice to detail a timescale for the implementation of the Adult Restorative Justice Strategy and associated Action Plan.

**(AQW 18482/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** A public consultation on proposals for an Adult Restorative Justice Strategy was held in 2020. A summary of responses report was developed and presented to the Justice Committee in March 2021 as part of an oral briefing by my officials. This report is currently being finalised to ensure it meets accessibility criteria for those who may require assistive technology, and then it will be published. Copies will be provided to all those who were engaged in the consultation process.

Once published, the Working Group, which developed the consultation document, will be reconvened to finalise the Strategy and develop a multi-year Action Plan for implementation of the key priorities identified. I anticipate that a finalised Strategy and Action Plan will be available in the Autumn; the documents will be presented to the Justice Committee once available.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the implementation of the Adult Restorative Justice Strategy and associated Action Plan.

**(AQW 18484/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** I refer to my previous answer to AQW 18482/17-22, which details my Department's plans to finalise and implement the Adult Restorative Justice Strategy and Action Plan, along with approximate timescales for this work.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of domestic abuse incidents and crimes, reported per constituency, in each of the past five years.

**(AQW 18490/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The Department does not hold the information requested. The recording of information on offences related to domestic 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 to outline what legislation applies to the theft of lead fittings from buildings.

**(AQW 18586/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The Theft (Northern Ireland) Act 1969 applies to all instances of theft, including the items to which you refer.

Depending on circumstances the Theft (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 and the Criminal Damage (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 may also apply.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice to detail what laws govern facial recognition technologies in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18605/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** There is currently no specific legislative provision governing the use of facial recognition technology in Northern Ireland. However, the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA) which implements the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Law Enforcement Directive is applicable to all uses of facial recognition technology, both private and public. Part 3 of DPA implements the Directive governing the police use of data. The Human Rights Act is also of relevance.

## Department for the Economy

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for an update on the Limited Company Director's Support Scheme; and (ii) to detail the number of grants paid to date.

**(AQW 16283/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** In the rolling out of the Limited Company Director's Support Scheme, a potential issue was identified relating to the tax treatment of the proposed grant. In order to prevent retrospective difficulties for applicants, the decision was taken to pause the processing of applications until a solution to the tax treatment issue was identified. Whilst I appreciate that this delay is frustrating for applicants it was considered the best approach to reduce the overall administrative burden and delay of payments.

After taking advice from relevant stakeholders, including HMRC, a solution to allow payments to proceed has been identified. Invest NI, who manage the scheme on behalf of my Department, has written to all relevant applicants providing an update and seeking all relevant additional information to enable processing of applications to proceed.

The first payments under the scheme were issued 19 March 2021 and to date £476k in support has been provided. Invest NI remain committed to assessing and verifying all outstanding applications, and processing payments, to eligible applicants as quickly as possible.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy for a list of stakeholders that Hatch Regeneris has engaged with in their recent consultation.

**(AQW 16506/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Hatch Regeneris has been undertaking independent research into the environmental, social and economic impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and development in Northern Ireland. Hatch has engaged with a range of government stakeholders listed in alphabetical order below and has also engaged with seven industry, community and environmental organisations. The Department is unable to release the specific details of the industry, community and environmental stakeholders due to commercial and privacy sensitivities.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| ■ Government Stakeholders:                                 | ■ Department of Communications, Climate Actions and Environment |
| ■ Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council                  | ■ Fermanagh & Omagh District Council                            |
| ■ Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council       | ■ Invest NI   |
| ■ Belfast City Council                                     | ■ Mid & East Antrim Borough Council                             |
| ■ Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council                   | ■ Mid Ulster District Council                                   |
| ■ Department for Infrastructure                            | ■ Northern Ireland Environment Agency                           |
| ■ Department for the Economy                               | ■ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency               |
| ■ Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs | ■ University of York  |

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what her Department is doing to address the need for a pay uplift for lecturers in further education colleges.

**(AQW 16580/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** I recognise and value the important contribution which lecturers in our further education (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. FE colleges as employers are responsible for setting the pay and conditions of their employees and my Department has not been involved in the negotiations on lecturers' pay and conditions that have been taking place between Trade Union Side (TUS) and the College Employers' Forum (CEF), which represents college management.

However, under Managing Public Money (NI) which sets out the principles which public sector organisations are required to follow when dealing with public resources, the FE colleges, as Non-Departmental Public Bodies, are required to refer to the Department for the Economy (DfE), as their sponsor department, any activities which appear novel, contentious or repercussive. The guidance also specifically requires the sponsor department to exercise "meaningful oversight of the ALB's (arm's length body) strategy and performance, pay arrangements...."

As a result, if and when an agreement is reached between the CEF and TUS through the negotiations, any resulting Business Case will have to be referred to the Department for appraisal prior to seeking my approval.

In the meantime, it is important that the negotiations are afforded the space needed to reach agreement. While I would encourage both the trade unions and the colleges to continue to engage constructively in the negotiations in order to limit any impact on learners, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further at this time

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister for the Economy for her Department's estimate of the percentage of laws affecting the Northern Ireland economy which now fall to be made not in Belfast or London, but in Brussels.

**(AQW 16803/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Of the 325 high-level EU legislative instruments which will continue to apply to Northern Ireland by virtue of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, around a third are relevant to the Department for the Economy (DfE).

The current working assessment that 35 of these instruments concern devolved policy areas that are wholly or partly the responsibility of DfE; and that 78 concern non-devolved areas in which DfE has varying degrees of policy interest (see table below).

There is no reliable measure of these laws as a proportion of the total body of domestic laws affecting the economy.

- Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation
- Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation
- Regulation (EU) No 952/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 October 2013 laying down the Union Customs Code
- Council Regulation (EC) No 515/97 of 13 March 1997 on mutual assistance between the administrative authorities of the Member States and cooperation between the latter and the Commission to ensure the correct application of the law on customs and agricultural matters
- Council Directive 2010/24/EU of 16 March 2010 concerning mutual assistance for the recovery of claims relating to taxes, duties and other measures
- Regulation (EC) No 638/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 31 March 2004 on Community statistics relating to the trading of goods between Member States and repealing Council Regulation (EEC) No 3330/917

- Regulation (EC) No 471/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 May 2009 on Community statistics relating to external trade with non-member countries and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1172/95
- Regulation (EU) No 978/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 applying a scheme of generalised tariff preferences and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 732/2008
- Regulation (EU) 2015/479 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2015 on common rules for exports
- Regulation (EU) 2015/936 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 June 2015 on common rules for imports of textile products from certain third countries not covered by bilateral agreements, protocols or other arrangements, or by other specific Union import rules
- Regulation (EU) 2017/821 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 May 2017 laying down supply chain due diligence obligations for Union importers of tin, tantalum and tungsten, their ores, and gold originating from conflict-affected and high-risk areas
- Council Regulation (EC) No 1215/2009 of 30 November 2009 introducing exceptional trade measures for countries and territories participating in or linked to the European Union's Stabilisation and Association process
- Regulation (EU) 2017/1566 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 September 2017 on the introduction of temporary autonomous trade measures for Ukraine supplementing the trade concessions available under the Association Agreement
- Regulation (EU) 2016/1036 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 June 2016 on protection against dumped imports from countries not members of the European Union
- Regulation (EU) 2016/1037 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 June 2016 on protection against subsidised imports from countries not members of the European Union
- Regulation (EU) 2015/478 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2015 on common rules for imports
- Regulation (EU) 2015/755 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2015 on common rules for imports from certain third countries
- Regulation (EU) 2015/476 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2015 on the measures that the Union may take following a report adopted by the WTO Dispute Settlement Body concerning anti-dumping and anti-subsidy matters
- Regulation (EU) 2015/477 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2015 on measures that the Union may take in relation to the combined effect of anti-dumping or anti-subsidy measures with safeguard measures
- Regulation (EU) No 654/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 concerning the exercise of the Union's rights for the application and enforcement of international trade rules and amending Council Regulation (EC) No 3286/94 laying down Community procedures in the field of the common commercial policy in order to ensure the exercise of the Community's rights under international trade rules, in particular those established under the auspices of the World Trade Organization
- Regulation (EU) 2015/1145 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 July 2015 on the safeguard measures provided for in the Agreement between the European Economic Community and the Swiss Confederation
- Regulation (EU) 2015/475 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2015 on the safeguard measures provided for in the Agreement between the European Economic Community and the Republic of Iceland
- Regulation (EU) 2015/938 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 June 2015 on the safeguard measures provided for in the Agreement between the European Economic Community and the Kingdom of Norway
- Regulation (EU) No 332/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 on certain procedures for applying the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Serbia, of the other part
- Regulation (EU) 2015/752 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2015 on certain procedures for applying the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Montenegro, of the other part
- Regulation (EU) No 19/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 January 2013 implementing the bilateral safeguard clause and the stabilisation mechanism for bananas of the Trade Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and Colombia and Peru, of the other part
- Regulation (EU) No 20/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 January 2013 implementing the bilateral safeguard clause and the stabilisation mechanism for bananas of the Agreement establishing an Association between the European Union and its Member States, on the one hand, and Central America on the other
- Regulation (EU) 2016/400 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 implementing the safeguard clause and the anti-circumvention mechanism provided for in the Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part
- Regulation (EU) 2016/401 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 implementing the anti-circumvention mechanism provided for in the Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part

- Regulation (EU) 2015/941 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 June 2015 on certain procedures for applying the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, of the other part
- Regulation (EU) 2015/940 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 June 2015 on certain procedures for applying the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, of the other part, and for applying the Interim Agreement on trade and trade-related matters between the European Community, of the one part, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, of the other part
- Regulation (EU) 2015/939 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 June 2015 on certain procedures for applying the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Albania, of the other part
- Regulation (EU) No 511/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2011 implementing the bilateral safeguard clause of the Free Trade Agreement between the European Union and its Member States and the Republic of Korea
- Regulation (EU) 2017/355 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 February 2017 on certain procedures for applying the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, of the one part, and Kosovo of the other part
- Regulation (EU) 2016/1076 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 June 2016 applying the arrangements for products originating in certain states which are part of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States provided for in agreements establishing, or leading to the establishment of, economic partnership agreements
- Directive (EU) 2015/1535 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 September 2015 laying down a procedure for the provision of information in the field of technical regulations and of rules on Information Society services, with the exception of provisions relating to rules on information society services
- Regulation (EU) No 1025/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 on European standardisation, amending Council Directives 89/686/EEC and 93/15/EEC and Directives 94/9/EC, 94/25/EC, 95/16/EC, 97/23/EC, 98/34/EC, 2004/22/EC, 2007/23/EC, 2009/23/EC and 2009/105/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Council Decision 87/95/EEC and Decision No 1673/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council
- Regulation (EC) No 765/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 July 2008 setting out the requirements for accreditation and market surveillance relating to the marketing of products and repealing Regulation (EEC) No 339/93
- Regulation (EC) No 764/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 July 2008 laying down procedures relating to the application of certain national technical rules to products lawfully marketed in another Member State and repealing Decision No 3052/95/EC4
- Council Regulation (EC) No 2679/98 of 7 December 1998 on the functioning of the internal market in relation to the free movement of goods among the Member States
- Council Directive 85/374/EEC of 25 July 1985 on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States concerning liability for defective products
- Council Directive 73/361/EEC of 19 November 1973 on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States relating to the certification and marking of wire-ropes, chains and hooks
- Directive 2014/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to lifts and safety components for lifts
- Council Directive 92/42/EEC of 21 May 1992 on efficiency requirements for new hot-water boilers fired with liquid or gaseous fuels
- Regulation (EU) 2016/426 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 on appliances burning gaseous fuels and repealing Directive 2009/142/EC
- Council Directive 75/324/EEC of 20 May 1975 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to aerosol dispensers
- Directive 2010/35/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 June 2010 on transportable pressure equipment and repealing Council Directives 76/767/EEC, 84/525/EEC, 84/526/EEC, 84/527/EEC and 1999/36/EC
- Directive 2014/68/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making available on the market of pressure equipment
- Directive 2014/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making available on the market of simple pressure vessels
- Directive 2009/34/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2009 relating to common provisions for both measuring instruments and methods of metrological control
- Council Directive 75/107/EEC of 19 December 1974 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to bottles used as measuring containers
- Council Directive 76/211/EEC of 20 January 1976 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making-up by weight or by volume of certain prepackaged products

- Council Directive 80/181/EEC of 20 December 1979 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to units of measurement and on the repeal of Directive 71/354/EEC7
- Directive 2007/45/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 September 2007 laying down rules on nominal quantities for prepacked products, repealing Council Directives 75/106/EEC and 80/232/EEC, and amending Council Directive 76/211/EEC
- Directive 2011/17/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2011 repealing Council Directives 71/317/EEC, 71/347/EEC, 71/349/EEC, 74/148/EEC, 75/33/EEC, 76/765/EEC, 76/766/EEC and 86/217/EEC regarding metrology
- Directive 2014/31/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making available on the market of non-automatic weighing instruments
- Directive 2014/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making available on the market of measuring instruments
- Regulation (EU) 2016/425 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 on personal protective equipment and repealing Council Directive 89/686/EEC
- Directive 2006/42/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 May 2006 on machinery, and amending Directive 95/16/EC
- Directive 2014/30/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to electromagnetic compatibility
- Directive 2014/34/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to equipment and protective systems intended for use in potentially explosive atmospheres
- Directive 2014/35/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making available on the market of electrical equipment designed for use within certain voltage limits
- Directive 2014/53/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making available on the market of radio equipment and repealing Directive 1999/5/EC
- Regulation (EU) No 1007/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 September 2011 on textile fibre names and related labelling and marking of the fibre composition of textile products and repealing Council Directive 73/44/EEC and Directives 96/73/EC and 2008/121/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council
- Directive 94/11/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of 23 March 1994 on the approximation of the laws, regulation and administrative provisions of the Member States relating to labelling of the materials used in the main components of footwear for sale to the consumer
- Regulation (EC) No 1223/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2009 on cosmetic products
- Directive 2009/48/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the safety of toys
- Directive 2013/53/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 November 2013 on recreational craft and personal watercraft and repealing Directive 94/25/EC92
- Regulation (EU) No 649/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 July 2012 concerning the export and import of hazardous chemicals
- Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 concerning the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH), establishing a European Chemicals Agency, amending Directive 1999/45/EC and repealing Council Regulation (EEC) No 793/93 and Commission Regulation (EC) No 1488/94 as well as Council Directive 76/769/EEC and Commission Directives 91/155/EEC, 93/67/EEC, 93/105/EC and 2000/21/EC1
- Regulation (EC) No 1272/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on classification, labelling and packaging of substances and mixtures, amending and repealing Directives 67/548/EEC and 1999/45/EC, and amending Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006
- Regulation (EU) No 528/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 May 2012 concerning the making available on the market and use of biocidal products
- Regulation (EC) No 106/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 January 2008 on a Community energy-efficiency labelling programme for office equipment
- Directive 2009/125/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 October 2009 establishing a framework for the setting of ecodesign requirements for energy-related products
- Regulation (EU) 2017/1369 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 July 2017 setting a framework for energy labelling and repealing Directive 2010/30/EU
- Council Regulation (EC) No 2964/95 of 20 December 1995 introducing registration for crude oil imports and deliveries in the Community
- Council Regulation (EC) No 2182/2004 of 6 December 2004 concerning medals and tokens similar to euro coins



- Regulation (EC) No 1889/2005 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 October 2005 on controls of cash entering or leaving the Community
- Directive 2014/40/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 April 2014 on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States concerning the manufacture, presentation and sale of tobacco and related products and repealing Directive 2001/37/EC
- Council Regulation (EC) No 116/2009 of 18 December 2008 on the export of cultural goods
- Directive 2014/60/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 on the return of cultural objects unlawfully removed from the territory of a Member State and amending Regulation (EU) No 1024/2012
- Council Directive 69/493/EEC of 15 December 1969 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to crystal glass
- Council Regulation (EC) No 428/2009 of 5 May 2009 setting up a Community regime for the control of exports, transfer, brokering and transit of dual-use items
- Council Regulation (EC) No 2368/2002 of 20 December 2002 implementing the Kimberley Process certification scheme for the international trade in rough diamonds
- Council Directive 2006/112/EC of 28 November 2006 on the common system of value added tax
- Council Directive 2008/9/EC of 12 February 2008 laying down detailed rules for the refund of value added tax, provided for in Directive 2006/112/EC, to taxable persons not established in the Member State of refund but established in another Member State
- Council Regulation (EU) No 904/2010 of 7 October 2010 on administrative cooperation and combating fraud in the field of value added tax
- Council Directive 2010/24/EU of 16 March 2010 concerning mutual assistance for the recovery of claims relating to taxes, duties and other measures
- Thirteenth Council Directive 86/560/EEC of 17 November 1986 on the harmonization of the laws of the Member States relating to turnover taxes - Arrangements for the refund of value added tax to taxable persons not established in Community territory
- Council Directive 2009/132/EC of 19 October 2009 determining the scope of Article 143(b) and (c) of Directive 2006/112/EC as regards exemption from value added tax on the final importation of certain goods
- Council Directive 2006/79/EC of 5 October 2006 on the exemption from taxes of imports of small consignments of goods of a non-commercial character from third countries
- Council Directive 2008/118/EC of 16 December 2008 concerning the general arrangements for excise duty and repealing Directive 92/12/EEC
- Council Regulation (EU) No 389/2012 of 2 May 2012 on administrative cooperation in the field of excise duties and repealing Regulation (EC) No 2073/2004
- Council Directive 92/83/EEC of 19 October 1992 on the harmonization of the structures of excise duties on alcohol and alcoholic beverages
- Council Directive 92/84/EEC of 19 October 1992 on the approximation of the rates of excise duty on alcohol and alcoholic beverages
- Council Directive 2011/64/EU of 21 June 2011 on the structure and rates of excise duty applied to manufactured tobacco
- Council Directive 2003/96/EC of 27 October 2003 restructuring the Community framework for the taxation of energy products and electricity
- Council Directive 2007/74/EC of 20 December 2007 on the exemption from value added tax and excise duty of goods imported by persons travelling from third countries
- Directive 2009/72/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 concerning common rules for the internal market in electricity and repealing Directive 2003/54/EC
- Regulation (EC) No 714/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 on conditions for access to the network for cross-border exchanges in electricity and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1228/2003
- Regulation (EC) No 713/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 establishing an Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators
- Directive 2005/89/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 January 2006 concerning measures to safeguard security of electricity supply and infrastructure investment
- Regulation (EU) No 1227/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on wholesale energy market integrity and transparency
- Directive 2010/75/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 November 2010 on industrial emissions (integrated pollution prevention and control)
- Council Regulation (EU) 2015/1588 of 13 July 2015 on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to certain categories of horizontal State aid
- Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 of 17 June 2014 declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the internal market in application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty

- Commission Regulation (EU) No 1407/2013 of 18 December 2013 on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to de minimis aid
- Commission Regulation (EU) No 360/2012 of 25 April 2012 on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to de minimis aid granted to undertakings providing services of general economic interest
- Commission Regulation (EU) No 1408/2013 of 18 December 2013 on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to de minimis aid in the agriculture sector
- Commission Regulation (EU) No 717/2014 of 27 June 2014 on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to de minimis aid in the fishery and aquaculture sector
- Council Regulation (EU) 2015/1589 of 13 July 2015 laying down detailed rules for the application of Article 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
- Commission Regulation (EC) No 794/2004 of 21 April 2004 implementing Council Regulation (EC) No 659/1999 laying down detailed rules for the application of Article 93 of the EC Treaty
- Regulation (EU) 2019/287 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 February 2019 implementing bilateral safeguard clauses and other mechanisms allowing for the temporary withdrawal of preferences in certain trade agreements concluded between the European Union and third countries

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what engagement she has had, or plans to have, with the Minister of Education regarding the provision of childcare to facilitate parents return to work and aid economic recovery.

**(AQW 17361/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Department of Education leads on childcare issues. I have engaged with the Minister for Education as part of considerations at the Executive on the importance of childcare, particularly as an enabler of economic recovery.

**Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for the Economy given that under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations travel was only permitted for specified purposes, whether she will revise the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme: Part B to include travel agents that have faced loss of business as a result of overseas travel cancellations.

**(AQW 17888/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) was launched to meet the needs of businesses specifically named as having to close or cease trading in the Health Protection Regulations, but which were not eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

A further element to CRBSS (Part B) was launched to support businesses which were not named in the Health Protection Regulations, but which were impacted by the closure of businesses that were named. This might be because they supply such a business or are otherwise reliant upon them being open and fully operational in order to trade.

Depending upon a travel agency's business model, they may have been eligible for Part B of CRBSS (e.g. if they were engaged in domestic tourism activity and therefore impacted by the closure of named businesses such as hotels or tourism attractions).

Businesses which were not named in the Health Protection Regulations, or which were not impacted by the closure of a named business, were unfortunately not eligible for the scheme.

At this stage, there are no plans to re-open the CRBSS or revise its criteria.

In addition to CRBSS Part B, you will be aware of the Executive Office Travel Agent Scheme which operated in March, and will pay out up to £10,000 to eligible travel agents.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy in relation to the COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan published in July 2020, (i) to detail her assessment of its recommendations; (ii) what steps her Department intends to take in relation to its recommendations; and (iii) to outline how its recommendations are being factored into future Programme for Government outcomes.

**(AQW 17901/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:**

- (i) The recommendations set out in COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan ("the Plan") published in July 2020 are comprehensive and wide ranging. The Plan provides a thorough analysis of how the pandemic has affected women and offers policy recommendations to address gender inequalities through the Covid Recovery agenda. This includes reducing the gender pay gap, ensuring women have the appropriate skills to access digital technologies, support rural women and SME participation in the digital economy, and strengthening access to high quality broadband. It also notes that many of the issues raised are long standing issues and not directly related to the impact of Covid-19, although may have been compounded by the pandemic.
- (ii) The Woman's Policy Group's plan is a welcome contribution to the Economic Recovery conversation. Whilst many of the recommendations set out in the Plan fall outside the remit of my Department a number of them will have been supported and bolstered by the actions contained in my Economic Recovery Action plan. For example, the actions

designed to support a highly skilled and agile work force include looking to the future skills needs and working closely with industry and key sectors to upskill and reskill our people. This includes support for woman returners in digital roles and work to improve participation rates and progression of girls and women in STEM education and employment.

Economic recovery is and will remain for some time a huge challenge, therefore I welcome input to wider economic recovery discussion from all sectors of the community.

- (iii) In relation to Programme for Government (“PfG”), I understand that the Women’s Policy Group have corresponded directly to The Executive Office (“TEO”) on the draft PfG Outcomes Framework. My Department will continue to feed into the wider development of the PfG, however overall responsibility for the development of outcomes rests with TEO.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the support available for small business start ups.  
(AQW 18074/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I would refer the member to the answer I gave in AQW 16409 17-22.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the level of foreign direct investment secured over the last two financial years.  
(AQW 18075/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** In 2018-19 and 2019-20 Invest NI support has helped secure investments from over 190 externally owned companies, including new and repeat investors. These companies have committed to creating 5,177 jobs and a total investment of £578m in the Northern Ireland economy. This information is readily available on Open Data NI, where Invest NI publishes five years of data on its financial support to businesses.

Information on the most recent financial year, 2020-21 will be available in due course, usually in June, once Invest NI has completed its end of year validation exercise.

Invest NI’s support to help businesses grow ranges from expert advice and guidance to a wide portfolio of financial support towards productivity improvements, skills development, strategic planning, job creation, Research & Development, technical capability and exporting.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline any engagement she has had with Queen’s University, Belfast in relation to the ongoing industrial dispute involving its crèche workers.  
(AQW 18081/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I am aware of the ongoing industrial action by crèche workers in Queen’s University Belfast. I respect the right of staff to take part in mandated industrial action and recognise that these decisions are not taken lightly.

However, whilst the Department provides funding and sets the strategic direction for the sector in Northern Ireland, universities are autonomous institutions and are responsible for their own policies and procedures, including those related to conditions of employment. Therefore this is a matter for Queen’s University Belfast, as the employer, and the staff trade unions to resolve.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the collaborative work carried out with other Departments, in particular the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities, in developing the new energy strategy.  
(AQW 18093/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I recognise that the development and delivery of a new Energy Strategy requires a joined-up approach across the Executive. That is why my department has led a significant collaborative work programme across central government and also involving local government, arms-length bodies, the energy industry and other key stakeholders.

The structures put in place include a Government Stakeholders Group, which bring together all departments with a remit for energy policy; the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and Department for Communities (DfC) are both members of this. Officials from DfI and DfC, along with other departments including the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), are represented on working groups of relevance to their policy remits. In addition, DfI leads the Transport Working Group for the Energy Strategy.

The success of this collaborative approach is clearly evidenced through the Energy Strategy Policy Options Consultation published at the end of March, which covers the full breadth of energy policy issues across the Executive.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) to what extent will the implementation and ongoing policy development of the new Energy Strategy be carried out by departmental officials, and external staff; and (ii) for the anticipated cost of utilising external staff for these roles.  
(AQW 18094/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** Whilst my department is leading on the development of the Executive’s new Energy Strategy, responsibility for policy development rests with officials from all departments with an energy remit. We have brought these officials together

through the Energy Strategy Government Stakeholders Group and the five working groups (consumers, energy efficiency, heat, power and transport).

We have ensured external input to the policy development process through a range of routes including the Call for Evidence, stakeholder groups, working groups, the Expert Panel and an ongoing research and analytical work programme. The current consultation also provides a further opportunity for external input to its development. However, decision making for energy policies remains the responsibility of departmental officials, not external representatives.

The role of external staff – for example through regulated companies or delivery bodies – in implementing future energy policies will depend on the priorities identified through the Energy Strategy and will be specific to each individual energy intervention. It is not possible to anticipate the role and associated costs of external staff at this stage in the strategy development process.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister for the Economy how much funding has been set aside by her Department and its arm's-length bodies to celebrate the Northern Ireland Centenary.

**(AQW 18105/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Officials in my Department have sought funding from both the Northern Ireland Office and the Department of Finance in relation to events aimed celebrating and marking the Centenary of Northern Ireland.

A number of bids were submitted to the Department of Finance in November of last year as part of the New Decade New Approach.

My Department and arms-length bodies continue to work closely to put together a programme of events to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland and to promote our economy.

The programme includes a number of global showcase events which will use the Centenary of Northern Ireland as a springboard to economic recovery.

We will use these events to celebrate Northern Ireland's rich industrial and manufacturing heritage of the past 100 years whilst promoting our economic recovery and setting out economic vision for the next decade on a global stage.

My Officials have also held discussions with the Northern Ireland Office regarding funding for a centenary Investment Conference. Due to Covid restrictions and the need for certainty around planning, that conference has now been postponed until March 2022, discussions around its funding remain ongoing.

The projected cost of the programme including the Investment Conference totals £2.25million, it is expected that the funding requirements will be met from within existing budgets.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy what she is doing to challenge fire and re-hire practices.

**(AQW 18160/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** I refer the member to my response to AQW 17614/17-22.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy what monitoring her Department undertaking in relation to hospitality employers that withhold wages to workers.

**(AQW 18162/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Department for the Economy does not collect or hold information on employers who withhold staff wages in the hospitality or any business sector.

Employees should check their payslip and contract of employment and/or engage with their employer to see if there is an explanation as to why they have not received their full pay. Employees who believe illegal deductions have been taken from their wages may be able to complain to an Industrial Tribunal.

Anyone who finds themselves in this position may wish to consider contacting the Labour Relations Agency - Workplace Information Service on 03300 555 300 for confidential and impartial information.

In addition, the Law Centre NI provides free, independent, specialist legal advice (subject to capacity) on employment rights. The Law Centre can be contacted on its advice line on 028 9024 4401 or by email: [employmentadvice@lawcentreni.org](mailto:employmentadvice@lawcentreni.org).

**Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the grant support provided by her Department for business start-ups.  
**(AQW 18166/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** There is a wide range of support, financial and advisory, available from Invest NI and other organisations, for people considering starting a business.

The Northern Ireland Business Start Up Programme (NIBSUP), promoted under the Go for it (<https://www.goforitni.com/>) brand and delivered by Northern Ireland's 11 councils, is available to all potential new start businesses. The programme provides one-to-one support from an experienced business advisor, with help to develop a practical business plan and referral to follow on support options.

Besides Invest NI's role in NIBSUP, it provides a wide range of support, financial and advisory, to new start businesses:

- Propel Pre-Accelerator: delivered by IGNITE, a UK-based start-up support and investment network. The programme offers workshops, tutorials, networking opportunities, mentoring, financial support and access to investment.
- Start Ups with export potential: Such businesses can also access support for product development, skills development, market development, strategy development and well as support for job creation. High potential start-ups may also apply to five equity and debt funds as part of Invest NI's Access to Finance (<https://www.investni.com/support-for-business/funding-through-loans-and-equity>) portfolio.

Invest NI also works closely with other partners such as:

- Techstart: Proof of concept: providing grant support for entrepreneurs to explore the viability and commercial potential of an innovative concept.
- Catalyst: CO-founders: is open to individuals and teams who are interested in product development and start-ups, focused on science, technology and engineering.

Information on the wide range of support available to start ups is available through Invest NI's Business Support team on 0800 181 4422 or [enquiry@investni.com](mailto:enquiry@investni.com).

Invest NI also provides a comprehensive range of information on [www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk](http://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk). Two parts of the website are particularly helpful for start-up businesses - My New Business (<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/my-new-business>) and Starting a business A to Z (<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/starting-business-z>).

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the (i) conversations had with; and (ii) advice given to bars and restaurants in relation to the rules on outdoor seating areas, prior to 30 April 2021.

**(AQW 18175/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** This is not within the remit of my Department. This is for the Department of Health.

**Mr Stalford** asked the Minister for the Economy what progress has been made to replace the funding shortfall to Invest NI regarding local Foreign Direct Investment.

**(AQW 18188/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Invest NI is working closely with businesses and continues to support them to set-up, to expand and to attract new investors into Northern Ireland. Invest NI is very much open for business and welcome approaches from businesses seeking support.

Where there is a deficit in funding, relevant bids will be submitted to the Department of Finance through normal monitoring processes.

The Minister for Finance leads on fiscal policy and the replacement of EU funding. The UK Government has announced new UK-wide domestic funds to replace historic Structural Funds. These are competitive funds and the NI Executive has no role in determining what projects will be supported. Arms-Length Bodies will be encouraged to submit bids for relevant projects and Programmes.

**Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what action is required by a retailer for inclusion in the High Street Voucher Scheme stimulus package; and (ii) what sectors are included as voucher spend outlets.

**(AQW 18215/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** A process of consultation and engagement is being planned for stakeholders in the retail and hospitality sectors, in order to ensure key messages and materials are provided in advance of scheme implementation.

Further information on the High Street Stimulus Scheme will be released in due course via a multi-media advertising campaign to reach all audiences, including retailers.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy how many bars and/or hospitality settings were inspected in Belfast ahead of the re-opening of the hospitality sector on 30 April 2021.

**(AQW 18226/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** This is not within the remit of my Department. This is a matter for Belfast City Council.

**Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for the Economy what mechanisms are in place to exclude businesses from grant schemes where they have been found to be withholding wages or furlough pay from their workers.

**(AQW 18243/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** While specific information relating to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is not captured during the application process, businesses applying for Covid support from my Department are required to submit certain information relating to both the applicant and the business, and this can be provided to other public bodies.

In relation to activities of the type outlined above, should an investigating body submit a request for such information in order to facilitate a tribunal or investigation, my Department will do whatever it can to provide it.

Where my Department (or its delivery partners) become aware of suspected or actual fraud, there are formal procedures in place to report, investigate and take action to recoup funds where necessary and appropriate.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline to what extent the lag in the Republic of Ireland's COVID-19 vaccination process will impact upon Northern Ireland's tourism recovery.

**(AQW 18251/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The recovery of the tourism industry in Northern Ireland will come from the domestic market and the close to home markets of the Republic of Ireland and GB. In the July to October period last year, the tourism and hospitality industry reported that they welcomed large numbers of tourists from the Republic of Ireland, with more than half visiting Northern Ireland for a holiday break for the first time.

As our own vaccination programme successfully rolls out, I have committed additional funding of £4 million to Tourism Northern Ireland for marketing campaigns in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland this year. The Northern Ireland return to market campaign commenced on 3rd May to run through the summer. This has allowed a three-week booking period in advance of the indicative reopening date of 24th May and it is anticipated that demand will be high. The campaign will run alongside a 'We're Good to Go' Campaign, as research indicates the importance of this industry standard in providing reassurance to consumers.

When the time is right, and in line with public health advice and the lifting of quarantine rules, we will activate a timely return to market campaign in the Republic of Ireland similar to the very successful campaign that we ran in this market in summer 2020.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has identified areas where new primary legislation is required in regards to improving employment rights.

**(AQW 18296/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The significant impact of the pandemic has resulted in a need to prioritise Covid-19 related employment legislation. Legislation has already been introduced to protect workers' rights in respect of annual leave and in relation to statutory family-related payments and redundancy entitlements for those on the furlough scheme. Legislation to 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 comes into operation on 31 May 2021. Previously this health and safety provision had only been afforded to employees. To date, it has been possible to use secondary legislation for these purposes.

In terms of primary legislation, I am pleased to have been able to make progress towards the introduction of a Bill to provide for Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay, an important 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.

While Northern Ireland already has a robust framework of employment rights in place, the unprecedented impact of the pandemic means that it will be necessary to keep other aspects of employment law under review. Employment law is also continually evolving at UK level and internationally. There will therefore inevitably be requirements to introduce further secondary legislation and to introduce primary legislation in the future. Any policy proposals for new legislation would be subject to appropriate public consultation and the necessary approvals from the Executive and the Assembly.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will develop a remote working strategy, to ensure that the benefits of remote working are maximised, and current employment rights law in this area are fit for purpose.

**(AQW 18297/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** I have no immediate plans to develop a remote working strategy; however, my economic vision for NI, as outlined in the recently published: A 10x Economy, recognises that the Covid-19 pandemic alongside digital advancements has driven transformative change in attitudes to remote and more agile ways of working.

For many, working remotely has become the norm, with many companies indicating they will offer more flexible ways of working in the future. The current change to mass remote working of office workers occurred almost overnight and the effects of that change are not yet fully understood. Only after we have further evidence of the impact of these changes can decisions be made for the longer term.

We should remember, though, that for many, working remotely is not an option. Therefore any future decisions that we make as a society, employers and individuals, must take into account the diversity of the job market and the needs of our economy.

Currently, in terms of facilitating remote working, the right to request a flexible working arrangement is already part of our employment law framework. Many good employers recognise the positive impact flexible working can have on their workforce and productivity. I would urge all employers to accommodate flexible working patterns where possible, as this can help retain skilled workers, maximise participation in the economy and ensure everyone achieves his or her potential. The Labour Relations Agency has produced A Practical Guide to Working from Home: Covid-19 and beyond (<https://www.lra.org.uk/sites/>

default/files/2020-10/A Practical Guide to Working from Home - Final Version 081020.pdf) which provides useful guidance for both employers and individuals when considering a home working arrangement.

Also, I recognise the importance of good broadband to working remotely. Project Stratum, the largest telecommunications infrastructure project undertaken by my Department, will deliver gigabit capable broadband infrastructure to more than 76,000 primarily rural premises across NI. Project Stratum will act as an enabler, helping businesses develop and extend their reach, and helping individuals fulfil their potential. As we emerge from this Covid-19 crisis, Project Stratum will play a vital role in rebuilding our economy, offering encouragement to businesses and citizens in those areas in need of broadband improvement by building the infrastructure necessary to enable their local economies to grow, compete and prosper.

In the longer term, delivering on: A 10x Economy will underpin our work on rebuilding the NI economy and promoting economic recovery and resilience. I am committed to delivering a strong, competitive and regionally balanced economy that works for everyone. For all of our people this means better jobs with better wages, in a more flexible working environment and a better overall quality of life.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the adequacy of current engagement of social partners in addressing poverty and low pay, and in developing economic policy in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18298/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** In line with New Decade New Approach, the Executive's actions to address poverty will be contained within the new Anti-Poverty Strategy. The Department for Communities is leading on the development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy using a co-design approach. A public consultation exercise is scheduled for later in the year and it is planned that the Anti-Poverty Strategy will be published in December 2021, subject to Executive approval.

Further information on the co-design process and timetable can be found at: Social Inclusion Strategies | Department for Communities (communities-ni.gov.uk) (<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/social-inclusion-strategies>)

I am fully committed to open and full engagement with all key stakeholders, including social partners, as my Department develops short and long-term economic policy.

The Executive's Programme for Government is built upon, and informed by, partnership working and collaboration both internally within the Civil Service and with our external partners. The principles of this partnership approach is applied to economic policy development throughout my Department.

I recognise that social partners have an important role to play in the development of our economy. I want to see continued collaboration between all partners as we look to the future and improve our economic performance.

By way of example, my Department has a cross sector engagement forum, which includes representatives from the business community, the voluntary & community sector, and from a wide range of sectors such as universities, retail, colleges, food, trade union, transport/haulage and local chambers of commerce. This was established in June 2017 to allow the Department to seek stakeholder views and to collectively discuss how best to work together throughout the EU Exit process.

The forum has since also facilitated engagement on issues arising from the pandemic and now on the new trading environment arising from the Protocol and the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement that could affect key sectors of the Northern Ireland economy.

I have recently launched my Economic Vision for a Decade of Innovation which provides a bold ambition to build an innovative and inclusive economy. My Department and I will continue to engage with all key partners as we develop the work programme to deliver the Vision which aims to deliver better jobs with better wages, in a more flexible working environment and a better overall quality of life. This collaboration and engagement will be crucial if we are to succeed in our ambitions for Northern Ireland.

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) what level of advice has been given to further education colleges for them to carry out suitable assessment adaptations for qualifications that require occupational competency, such as a licence to practice; (ii) to detail the number of students studying these types of occupational competency qualifications across each further education colleges; and (iii) whether the potential delay in awarding such qualifications would be a barrier to students seeking employment or further study.

**(AQW 18303/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:**

- (i) There are a significant number of vocational subjects that fall within the occupational competence category, e.g. construction, hairdressing, and vehicle maintenance and repair and these are awarded across multiple awarding organisations across the UK.

Awarding organisations have provided guidance to learning centres, including Further Education (FE) colleges, on the assessment and awarding approaches to be implemented, timing on when centres need to submit information, the records that they should maintain and on the nature of any centre-based quality assurance.

There are a number of NI specific challenges, such as the shorter academic term time in the FE sector, regional variances in terms of local restrictions (the FE sector in England has been permitted to open earlier than the FE sector

in NI) and the regional differences in the approaches to reopening of certain sectors on our pathway out of lockdown e.g. Close-contact services.

It is anticipated that the majority of assessments will be undertaken by Northern Ireland (NI) learners with adaptations put in place, but some assessments may need to be delayed until such times as they can be taken safely, to comply with public health guidance.

- (ii) There are currently 16,854 learners studying occupational competency qualifications in the FE colleges. The breakdown per FE college is shown below in Table 1.

College	Total Nos (2020/21)
SERC	600
SRC	4,100
SWC	3,500
BMC	1,374
NRC	5,236
NWRC	2,044
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,854</b>

- (ii) Policy makers, regulators and awarding organisations have facilitated an unprecedented range of flexibilities to allow adapted assessments to be undertaken to mitigate the impact on learners and to facilitate onwards progression as far as possible. The Department is working with the FE sector, CCEA Regulation, and relevant sector bodies and awarding organisations to ensure that the number of awards made in summer 2021 is maximised for NI learners.

This has further been facilitated by the Executive's approval of a return to on-site learning for those studying practical occupational competency subjects including those in close contact areas. All of these measures should ensure that learners will be able to complete their programme and progress into further education, training or enter the job market. For the anticipated small number of learners for whom there may be a delay in the awarding of qualifications, it will be a matter for an employer or educational institution to decide if they are content to accept a candidate whose qualification is pending.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the long term plans she has to help further and higher education students recover from the financial, educational and mental health challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, including local students studying in different jurisdictions.

**(AQW 18307/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Wind Farms off the Coast of Northern Ireland

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether her Department is engaged in discussions with the Crown Estate to obtain authorisation for wind farms off the coast of Northern Ireland; (ii) which locations are being considered; and (iii) what is the current state of those discussions.

**(AQW 18356/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Engagement between my officials and The Crown Estate (TCE) is ongoing to ensure that Northern Ireland interests are considered in the planning process for future leasing rounds of the seabed.

TCE is currently leading on a project entitled 'Broad Horizons' which will map key resource areas for offshore wind in England, Wales and Northern Ireland waters. DfE and DAERA officials are engaged in this process.

The first stage of the project has been completed with the publication of a technical report (link below): <https://www.thecrownestate.co.uk/media/3642/broad-horizons-offshore-wind-key-resource-area-summary-report.pdf>

The mapping from this report will be supplemented with localised environmental and economic information which will inform identification of the areas that present the most viable opportunities.

**Mr Buckley** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline whether her Department plans to address the lack of vacancies of enterprise centres in Upper Bann, with a view of promoting economic growth.

**(AQW 18400/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department has no responsibility for Local Enterprise Agencies, responsibility for local economic development rests with Councils.

**Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for the Economy whether Invest NI will seek to recoup the £10 million of expected credit losses which emanate from the Glenmore Biogas project.

**(AQW 18429/17-22)**



**Mrs Dodds:** The aim of the Sustainable Utilisation of Poultry Litter (SUPL) Scheme was to help resolve a significant local environmental and economic issue, and to help Northern Ireland comply with EU nitrates targets to positively impact the poultry sector and the wider Northern Ireland economy.

The plant has experienced a number of challenges at various stages including design challenges and operational difficulties. Having considered its options, the company's Board decided to pursue a refinance process. Invest NI sought independent advice in terms of maximising the return on its loan, including the potential refinance of the company.

Based on the terms of the refinance, Invest NI will not recoup any of its investment in the project. However the refinance means the plant should remain operational and provide cheaper, green energy for two large Northern Ireland manufacturers.

**Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether the expected credit losses associated with the Glenmore Biogas project will be realised.

**(AQW 18430/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The aim of the Sustainable Utilisation of Poultry Litter (SUPL) Scheme was to help resolve a significant local environmental and economic issue, and to help Northern Ireland comply with EU nitrates targets to positively impact the poultry sector and the wider Northern Ireland economy.

On the basis of the information currently available, which indicates we will not receive a return on this investment, the loan has been written off. The Department for the Economy and the Department of Finance have approved the write-off. The £10m budget cover requested to cover the write off was provided by Her Majesty's Treasury in the January monitoring round.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for the Economy whether an apprentice is able to gain international experience within the apprentice programmes delivered by her Department.

**(AQW 18431/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department funds the cost of off the job training for apprentices at level 2 to level 7 through the ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher Level Apprenticeships programmes. Delivery of training is through Northern Ireland based colleges, universities and non-statutory contractors. Funding does not extend to meet the cost of international travel.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy, given the UK government's commitments to eradicate the use of fossil fuels as part of its preparations to host the United Nations Climate Change Conference, whether she will review the NI Sustainable Energy Programme, including its subsidies, for the continued use of fossil fuels.

**(AQW 18456/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Any decisions on changes to future energy efficiency programmes, including the NI Sustainable Energy Programme, will be informed by the current policy options consultation on a new Energy Strategy which is open until 30th June 2021.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for the Economy whether there are any plans to create an enterprise zone in North Down.

**(AQW 18459/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Enterprise Zones are designed to stimulate economic growth by offering tax incentives, simplified planning, business rate discounts and superfast broadband to attract new business ventures. The majority of incentives available within Enterprise Zones in GB are, with the exception of Enhanced Capital Allowances (ECAs), already devolved policy areas and the NI Executive is already taking steps to support businesses using these levers.

HM Treasury has legal responsibility for designating Enterprise Zones (EZs) in the UK, and laid the Statutory Instrument designating a pilot Enterprise Zone in Coleraine in July 2016.

My Department's role is to ensure that the designated area, called the Atlantic Link Enterprise Campus (ALEC), is developed by Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council (CC&GC) in a way which will attract capital intensive companies.

HMT has confirmed that ECAs are not due to expire in Coleraine until 2024. A full evaluation of the pilot will take place then.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for the Economy what action her Department is taking to reduce unemployment levels, through training and apprenticeships, in North Down.

**(AQW 18460/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department continues to fund the off-the-job training of apprentices enrolled in the ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher Level Apprenticeships programmes. In addition, an Apprenticeship Recovery Package was introduced last September to help minimise apprenticeship job losses, maintain and grow the supply of apprenticeship opportunities, and support apprentices who have been displaced and lost their apprenticeship.

Higher Level Apprenticeships are available to people of all ages and I am also committed to making apprenticeship opportunities at levels 2 and 3 available to more people and sectors by amending the current age-related criteria. 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.

Through its Training for Success (TfS) programme, my Department provides training for approximately 140 young people (as at October 2020) in the North Down Parliamentary Constituency who are not in education or full time employment.

Reforms to the youth training system, which will deliver better outcomes for young people and better meet the needs of the local economy, will be introduced from September 2021 with Training for Success being replaced by a new NI Traineeship (at Level 2) and Skills for Life and Work (a new entry level/ level 1 programme). My Department is also developing a new vocational award at Level 3 which will support the needs of both learners and employers, whilst serving to strengthen the vocational educational pathway.

My Department's Assured Skills programme is a demand-led, pre-employment training programme which helps individuals gain the skills they need to compete for guaranteed job vacancies with new Foreign Direct Investment companies and expanding local based businesses. It provides industry-focused training which equips participants with the transferable skills that companies are looking for to compete for job opportunities, whilst offering assurances to investors who are creating new employment in Northern Ireland that the skills they require to be successful will be available. In the 2020/21 financial year 27 academies were launched, with 25 academies and 490 participants having commenced training. Thus far 19 academies have been completed with 336 individuals being upskilled, of which 332 have gained full time employment in areas such as financial services, business consultancy and data analytics. Since the start of this financial year 4 academies have been launched, with training due to start shortly. These academies are in areas such as financial services, IT and construction.

My Department's Careers Service is available to provide one to one personalised advice and guidance on the full range of available provision.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether vouchers issued under the High Street Voucher Scheme will be redeemable at market stalls and with independent traders operating from shared premises.  
(AQW 18517/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department will be undertaking a consultation and engagement process with all relevant stakeholders to inform scheme development.

Further information on the detail of the High Street Stimulus Scheme will be made available through a multi-media advertising campaign to reach all audiences, prior to its implementation.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy for a breakdown of how the £20 million allocated to the green economy in her Economic Recovery Action Plan in this financial year is to be spent.  
(AQW 18518/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** Building a green economy has been identified as a priority in both my Economic Recovery Action Plan and my Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland.

The additional funding allocated to deliver on the Greener Economy Pillar of my Economic Recovery Action Plan in 2021-22 is to be spent on:

- A Green Innovation Challenge Fund which will seek applications from NI businesses on innovative low carbon technologies that will place NI at the forefront of the energy transition. A pilot scheme will be run in this financial year with the full roll-out anticipated to take place in subsequent years.
- The development of an Invest to Save Fund to finance investments in central government buildings realising energy, carbon and cost savings. This project will stimulate growth, create new jobs and encourage investment in innovative and renewable technologies.
- A second call for Invest NI's Energy Efficiency Capital Grant to further support businesses embed energy efficiency within their strategy and operations.

Some of the Greener Economy actions within my Economic Recovery Action Plan will be delivered from baseline funding while others such as the Energy Efficiency Home Retrofit Scheme are longer term actions and will require funding in future financial years.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the actions her Department is taking to invest in capital projects to promote tourism in West Tyrone.  
(AQW 18555/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** Tourism NI does not have any Capital Programmes open for applications at present.

Tourism NI launched two Capital Funding Programmes to develop and promote tourism across Northern Ireland in 2020 - An Experience Development Programme and a Website Development Programme. These are now closed.

Tourism NI's Experience Development Programme, launched in August 2020, aims to support the development of new and enhanced tourism experiences throughout Northern Ireland. This programme received a total of 137 applications across Northern Ireland and 47 were awarded funding within the budget available. 3 applications were received from the West Tyrone area and 2 were funded.

The aim of Website Development Programme launched in July 2020 is to improve the attractiveness and bookability of the Northern Ireland experience through investment in the online presence of experience providers. This programme was funded

by the Department for Economy via Tourism NI in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and received 72 full applications, of which 70 were funded within the budget available. 3 applications were received from the West Tyrone area and 3 were funded.

Funded Projects in the West Tyrone Area.

Programme	Applicant	Amount Offered
Experience Development Programme	Wild Atlantic Distillery Limited	£37,496
Experience Development Programme	Gortin Glen Country Park	£97,876
Website Development Programme	Wild Atlantic Distillery Limited	£18,700
Website Development Programme	An Creagan	£12,432
Website Development Programme	Owenkillew Development Company Limited	£416

Tourism NI will be launching another Website Development Programme (in partnership with DAERA) and Experience Development Programme later in 2021 which will be open to potential applicants in the public, voluntary and private sectors across Northern Ireland.

Tourism NI also works in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to inform and support the delivery of their rural tourism capital investment programmes.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of fire and rehire practices.  
(AQW 18597/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** Employers sometimes need to make changes to staff contracts of employment because of economic circumstances. The business may need to be reorganised, moved to a new location or there may need to be changes because of new laws or regulations.

Nonetheless, I would caution any employer considering giving notice and offering a new contract with revised terms to an employee - known as 'firing and rehiring'.

There are statutory processes to follow, with employers required to 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 employee who believes he or she has been unfairly dismissed from their 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](mailto:employmentadvice@lawcentreni.org).

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any plans to reduce university fees in Northern Ireland for the 2021/22 academic year to encourage young people to attend higher education at a time when they are unable to supplement income through employment in the service and hospitality sector.  
(AQW 18608/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I have no plans to amend university fees for the 2021/22 academic year.

However, my Department delivers financial support to eligible Northern Ireland students through Student Finance NI in the form of maintenance loans and maintenance grants as a contribution towards students' living costs during the academic year.

Prospective students should ensure that they look online at [www.studentfinancenai.co.uk](http://www.studentfinancenai.co.uk) for all the financial assistance to which they may be entitled.

Students at Northern Ireland's universities who find themselves in financial hardship may also be eligible to receive an award from the Support Funds made available by the Department, and managed by the higher education institutions.

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any plans to bring forward legislation to restrict the practice known as fire and rehire.  
(AQW 18612/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I refer the member to my response to AQW 17614/17-22.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the British government's levelling up agenda; and (ii) whether she intends to replicate it to address regional economic imbalance in Northern Ireland, including the disadvantage felt by the North West.

**(AQW 18650/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:**

(i) *For her assessment of the UK Government's levelling up agenda*

The Levelling Up process has come along at a critical moment for Northern Ireland and is timely.

The UK currently invests 1.7% of GDP in R&D with an aspiration to raise that to 2.4%. Northern Ireland's R&D investment is comparable at 1.6%. So NI is not a regional outlier in UK terms and does not need to be treated differently, only fairly.

There is a requirement for more R&D investment by UK Government if the Levelling Up pledge is to be meaningful. It is also important that this funding is locally administered, within the UK-wide framework, to drive localised ownership and outcomes that matter to the NI economy.

To ensure that we get this investment we have established a multi-disciplinary team, with representation from across Northern Ireland, to respond collectively and with agility to demonstrate the opportunity for NI to be a critical player in the UK Government's future economic ambitions.

Work on the Levelling Up agenda remains ongoing, with the focus on both place and innovation becoming increasingly important to economic policy UK-wide.

(ii) *Whether she intends to replicate it to address regional economic imbalance in Northern Ireland, including the disadvantage felt by the North West.*

DfE is fully committed to the Levelling Up process which is focused on the nations and regions of the UK, and is a unique opportunity to promote investment across all of Northern Ireland.

Sub-regional engagement is a priority for DfE and remains strong, including in the Londonderry area. DfE and Invest NI are actively working with Derry City & Strabane District Council and regional partners to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the development and growth of the regional economy in the North West.

For the past five years, Foyle has been in the top five constituencies across Northern Ireland, in terms of assistance offered by Invest NI and planned investment, both overall and in terms of per adult population.

Both the Department and Invest NI are working with the Council and other relevant stakeholders on the emerging projects within the region's 'City Deal' proposal, with targeted investment in excess of £200m.

The recently published '10x Economy Vision' also provides a bold and ambitious framework to build an innovative and inclusive economy that will bring positive economic, social and environmental outcomes for all our people.

The Vision recognises the importance of place based investment, including: recognition of our innovation ecosystem; our thriving tourism offering; and our innovative and agile business environment. It also includes taking advantage of emerging opportunities like the flexibility offered by responding to digital advancements such as the change in attitudes to remote working.

Economic productivity is of course only one aspect of Levelling up, and disparities in education, investment, employment and health also need to be addressed to ensure access of opportunity for everyone in our society. Levelling up is as much about investment in people as it is about place.

Our approach to Levelling Up is therefore holistic and wide ranging, and the strategic approach we have developed will be to the benefit to the whole of Northern Ireland as we move forward.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy what action she intends to take in response to the RHI consultation process, which completed last month.

**(AQW 18723/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My officials are giving detailed consideration to all material received in response to the consultation. The outcome of the consultation will assist the Executive in making decisions on the future of the Scheme.

**Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for the Economy what assessment she has made in relation to North-South student mobility across higher and further education.

**(AQO 2009/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** I fully recognise the value of North-South student mobility and the contribution cross-border students make to the institutions they attend. Each student brings a different dimension to everyday engagement in lectures and other academic activity, bringing greater diversity, fresh ideas and new perspectives to university and college life. Our campuses are richer for this, therefore it is important that we continue to support these cross border flows.

The most recent figures show an increase in the numbers of students from Northern Ireland studying in the Republic of Ireland and a decrease in students from the Republic of Ireland enrolled at Higher Education and Further Education Institutions in Northern Ireland.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for the Economy how many inward investment jobs have been secured in West Tyrone by Invest NI's overseas offices since 2017.

**(AQO 2010/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** In the period 2016/17 to 2019/2020, Invest NI supported the promotion of 234 jobs by externally owned companies in the West Tyrone constituency leveraging total investment of £21.6 million and representing annual salaries of £3.5 million.

In 2021, a further 41 jobs have recently been announced by Houston Precision Engineering which will deliver a further £1 million in annual salaries to the constituency at full ramp-up.

In the period 2016/17 to 2019/20, Invest NI provided over 40 offers of other developmental assistance totalling some £2.3million to externally owned companies with operations in the constituency to drive their further growth and international competitiveness including support for research and development, skills development and to support the promotion of products and services made in West Tyrone in overseas markets.

This investment is in addition to the £3.2million in support provided by Invest NI to locally owned businesses in the constituency during the same period to support the promotion of a further 437 jobs.

It's also relevant to reflect that the West Tyrone constituency straddles two council areas; Fermanagh and Omagh and Derry City & Strabane and as such Invest NI efforts to attract international investment into these areas also creates potential employment opportunities for West Tyrone constituents. In the period 2016/17 to 2019/20, Invest NI supported the promotion of 1,356 jobs by externally-owned companies across these two council areas.

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline when she expects to receive completed reports from the consultants appointed by her Department to explore options regarding the future of HMS Caroline.

**(AQO 2011/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** During the period of temporary closure of HMS Caroline, my officials have been working to identify a range of options for the long term future of the Ship. Consultants were appointed to identify potential delivery models and options that support the retention of the Ship in Belfast and to make value for money recommendations. Maritime consultants were also appointed to provide specialist costing information. The final reports from the consultants have now been received. Discussions are actively ongoing with representatives of the National Museum of the Royal Navy and the National Lottery Heritage Fund on the options for the future of the attraction.

I re-emphasise that I remain committed to finding a solution that ensures that this important cultural and heritage visitor attraction remains in Belfast and I will make further comment on the matter in due course, once the discussions have concluded.

In the meantime, I would be happy for my officials to arrange to brief you on the project, if you would find this useful.

**Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for the Economy, under The Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, if the decision of the Statutory Review Panel is final.

**(AQO 2012/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Yes, the Statutory Review decision marks the final stage of the internal review process. However, should a participant be dissatisfied with the outcome of the review, they have the option to take their complaint externally to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman.

In all notification of outcome letters from the Statutory Review Officer, participants are informed of their right to take their case to the Ombudsman if they remain dissatisfied with the outcome. This notification includes sign posting to the NI Ombudsman's services and contact details.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the support her Department will provide to hotels to prepare for the return of overseas visitors.

**(AQO 2013/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department has worked closely with the hotel sector in preparation for re-opening, and the return of overseas visitors.

Hotels have been involved in Tourism NI international marketing and sales activity programmes, such as Meet the Buyer, delivered in partnership with Tourism Ireland. More events are planned for 2021.

My Department and Tourism NI have also worked with the hotel sector to produce a 'Working Safely during COVID-19 for Tourism and Hospitality Businesses' guide which explains how businesses can keep guests as safe as possible.

Tourism NI introduced 'We're Good To Go', a COVID safety accreditation, in 2020. Members are automatically eligible for the World Travel and Tourism Council international 'Safe Travels' stamp.

Tourism NI has also worked with the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation to create a webinar to help hotels prepare to reopen, and to outline available marketing support.

I have asked the Tourism Recovery Steering Group to develop a Phase Two Tourism Recovery Action Plan, which I hope to publish shortly. The Action Plan will include a range of measures aimed at supporting the tourism and hospitality industry, including the hotel sector, to drive demand and attract visitors from the domestic, Republic of Ireland and overseas markets.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her plans to restart the economy.  
**(AQO 2014/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** As part of the 'Pathway out of Restrictions process' my officials developed detailed proposals for the relaxing / reopening in four key areas including retail, close contact services, hospitality and tourism. These proposals have resulted in the recent reopening of close contact services, retail and outdoor hospitality. An indicative date of the 24th of May has also been agreed with Executive colleagues for the reopening of unlicensed and licensed premises indoors and the remainder of any tourist accommodation with the appropriate mitigations.

I have also launched my Economic Recovery Plan which sets out a road map to rebuilding the economy from the impact of the pandemic. Additional funding of £286.8m agreed by the Executive on the 1st of April will help deliver the plan which includes £145m for the High Street Stimulus Scheme. Other actions in the plan include the development of a flexible skills fund, widening the access to apprenticeships, development of a green innovation fund and delivering a Tourism Voucher Scheme to stimulate demand.

I also recently launched '10x Economy: An Economic Vision for a Decade of Innovation' which will provide a bold ambition to build an innovative and inclusive economy that will bring positive economic, social and environmental outcomes for all our people.

These plans focus on supporting a highly skilled workforce, stimulating research and development, building a greener economy and promoting investment, trade and exports as the drivers to our recovery.

**Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy what sectors her Department is working with to create new Apprenticeship Pathways, as outlined in the Economic Recovery Action Plan.  
**(AQO 2015/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department supports the work of Sectoral Partnerships who operate across a wide range of sectors including Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering, Life and Health Sciences, Hospitality and Tourism and ICT. These employer-led partnerships are central to the development of apprenticeship frameworks that meet the current and future needs of industry in Northern Ireland. As an example, the Apprenticeship Challenge Fund has identified the need for a new apprenticeship at Level 2 and Level 3 in Automated Entrance Systems, the development of which is being supported by the Built Environment Sectoral Partnership.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for the Economy when she will take action to implement the Green New Deal, as committed to in New Decade, New Approach.  
**(AQO 2016/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Climate change is without doubt one of the most pressing challenges facing our society today. As New Decade, New Approach rightly states, a coordinated, strategic approach and cross-departmental approach is required in our response.

Tomorrow, Tuesday 11th May, I will be launching '10x Economy: An Economic Vision for a Decade of Innovation' which will provide a bold ambition to build an innovative and inclusive economy that will bring positive economic, social and environmental outcomes for all our people. Supporting a greener and sustainable economy will be a key principle of this vision.

In both my Economic Recovery Action Plan and more recently, the Energy Strategy policy options consultation, I have identified 'Growing a Green Economy' as a key priority area.

My officials are also currently developing a strategic framework which will provide a first step in setting out a clear vision for Circular Economy in Northern Ireland.

These actions being progressed will ensure we maximise the economic impact of energy policies, invest in green innovation, develop a low carbon skills workforce and create new jobs.

Invest NI also offers a number of initiatives to support the green economy including supporting investment in a green sustainable recovery, exploiting market opportunities to deliver green jobs, and incentivising greater use of energy and resource efficiency technologies.

**Mr Catney** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she plans to address the difference between the £5,500 loan amount available to local postgraduate students studying in England and the £11,222 available to English students on the same course.

**(AQO 2017/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Northern Ireland students commencing postgraduate courses in the UK are currently eligible to apply for a non-means tested fee loan of up to £5,500 to help with course costs. This support was introduced in 2017, following a review of postgraduate support and a supporting public consultation.

However, I recognise that since the introduction of the 'contribution to costs' loan in England, postgraduate fees there have increased significantly, thereby often creating a shortfall in support for NI students.

My officials have therefore undertaken a review of the wider postgraduate landscape in Northern Ireland. The appropriateness of the current postgraduate fee loan towards the cost of taught postgraduate courses, both locally and in Great Britain, was reviewed alongside a range of potential options for maintenance loans or grants.

In seeking to address these issues, I published a public consultation on 26th April 2021 that will remain open until 25th June 2021. Any outcomes of the review, particularly in relation to the levels of financial support available, will be dependent upon the funding that is available to my Department over the coming years.





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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 21 May 2021

## Written Answers to Questions

### The Executive Office

**Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the meetings they have had relating to Brexit, since January 2020.

**(AQW 4463/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister):** A list of meetings and calls relating to EU Exit matters, attended by the First and deputy First Minister and or Junior Ministers, between January 2020 and 31 December 2020, is noted below.

Date	Event
23 January	Bilateral meeting between First Minister and Deputy Head of the German Embassy, Ms Julia Gross
28 January	Bilateral meeting between First Minister and deputy First Minister and Mark Drakeford AM – First Minister of Wales – In advance of the twenty-second meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (European Negotiations)
28 January	Twenty-second meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (European Negotiations)
4 February	Brexit Sub-Committee meeting
11 February	Brexit Sub-Committee meeting
20 February	Brexit Sub-Committee meeting
26 February	Brexit Sub-Committee meeting
4 March	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
10 March	Trilateral call between First Minister and deputy First Minister, Michael Russell MSP – Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, and Mark Drakeford AM – First Minister of Wales – Discussion relating to engagement in UK-EU future relationship negotiations
10 March	Bilateral meeting between First Minister and deputy First Minister with Rt. Hon. Michael Gove – Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster – Discussion relating to Ireland / Northern Ireland Protocol
11 March	Bilateral call between First Minister and deputy First Minister with Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP - Paymaster General – Update following first round of UK-EU negotiations
30 March	First meeting of UK-EU Joint Committee attended by Junior Minister Kearney and Junior Minister Lyons
28 April	Bilateral call between First Minister and deputy First Minister with Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP - Paymaster General – Update following second round of UK-EU negotiations
30 April	Bilateral call between First Minister and deputy First Minister with Rt. Hon. Conor Burns MP – Minister of State for Trade Policy – Update on the Trade Bill
7 May	Bilateral call between First Minister and deputy First Minister with Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP - Paymaster General – Update in advance of third round of UK-EU negotiations
11 May	Executive meeting including EU Exit issues
18 May	Executive meeting including EU Exit issues
18 May	Bilateral call between First Minister and deputy First Minister and Rt. Hon. Michael Gove – Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and Rt. Hon. Brandon Lewis – Secretary of State for Northern Ireland – Discussion relating to Ireland / Northern Ireland Protocol

Date	Event
21 May	Bilateral call between deputy First Minister, and Michael Russell MSP – Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs – In advance of the twenty-third meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (European Negotiations)
21 May	Trilateral call between First Minister and deputy First Minister, Michael Russell MSP – Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, and Mark Drakeford AM – First Minister of Wales – In advance of the twenty-third meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (European Negotiations)
21 May	Twenty-third meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (European Negotiations)
28 May	Quadrilateral call between First Minister and Junior Minister Kearney, Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP - Paymaster General, Michael Russell MSP – Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, and Mark Drakeford AM – First Minister of Wales – Update in advance of fourth round of UK-EU negotiations
5 June	Quadrilateral call between First Minister, Junior Minister Kearney and Junior Minister Lyons, Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP - Paymaster General, Michael Russell MSP – Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, and Jeremy Miles AM – Counsel General and Minister for European Transition – Update following fourth round of UK-EU negotiations
8 June	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
10 June	Bilateral call between First Minister and deputy First Minister and Rt. Hon. Michael Gove – Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster – In advance of the second meeting of the UK-EU Joint Committee
10 June	Business Engagement Forum meeting attended by Junior Minister Kearney and Junior Minister Lyons
12 June	Second meeting of UK-EU Joint Committee attended by First Minister and deputy First Minister, Junior Minister Kearney and Junior Minister Lyons
12 June	Bilateral call between First Minister and deputy First Minister with Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP - Paymaster General – Update in advance of high-level UK-EU stock take
15 June	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
17 June	Quadrilateral call between First Minister and Junior Minister Kearney, Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP - Paymaster General, Michael Russell MSP – Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, and Jeremy Miles AM – Counsel General and Minister for European Transition – Update following high-level UK-EU stock take
1 July	Business Engagement Forum meeting attended by Junior Minister Kearney and Junior Minister Lyons
2 July	Business Engagement Forum meeting attended by Junior Minister Kearney and Junior Minister Lyons
2 July	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
9 July	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
9 July	Business Engagement Forum meeting attended by Junior Minister Kearney and Junior Minister Lyons
16 July	Twenty-fourth meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (European Negotiations)
21 July	NI Business Brexit Working Group meeting attended by First Minister and deputy First Minister
23 July	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
30 July	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
6 August	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
7 August	Business Engagement Forum meeting attended by First Minister
20 August	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
3 September	Twenty-fifth meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (European Negotiations)
3 September	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters

Date	Event
9 September	Meeting with the Derry Chamber of Commerce attended by Junior Minister Kearney and Junior Minister Lyons
10 September	Quadrilateral call with the Paymaster General attended by Junior Minister Lyons and Junior Minister Kearney
10 September	Extraordinary meeting of UK-EU Joint Committee attended by First Minister and deputy First Minister
10-11 September	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
17 September	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
24 September	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
28 September	Third meeting of UK-EU Joint Committee attended by Junior Minister Kearney and Junior Minister Lyons
1 October	Quadrilateral call between First Minister and deputy First Minister, Minister Poots, Minister Dodds, Minister Mallon, Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP - Paymaster General, Michael Russell MSP – Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, and Jeremy Miles AM – Counsel General and Minister for European Transition – Update on EU Exit Readiness
5 October	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
6 October	Exit Operations (XO) Committee attended by Junior Minister Lyons and Junior Minister Kearney
8 October	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
16 October	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
19 October	Fourth meeting of UK-EU Joint Committee attended by First Minister and deputy First Minister and Junior Minister Lyons
22 October	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
28 October	Business Engagement Forum meeting attended by First Minister and deputy First Minister
29 October	Twenty-sixth meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (European Negotiations)
29 October	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
5 November	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
11 November	Quadrilateral call with the Paymaster General attended by Junior Minister Lyons
12 November	Exit Operations (XO) Committee attended by Junior Minister Lyons
16 November	Exit Operations (XO) Committee attended by Junior Minister Lyons
19 November	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
26 November	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
1 December	Exit Operations (XO) Committee attended by Junior Minister Lyons and Junior Minister Kearney
3 December	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
3 December	Twenty-seventh meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (European Negotiations)
4 December	Exit Operations (XO) Committee attended by Junior Minister Lyons and Junior Minister Kearney
8 December	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
9 December	Business Engagement Forum meeting attended by First Minister and Junior Minister Kearney
11 December	Exit Operations (XO) Committee attended by First Minister
15 December	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
16 December	Business Engagement Forum meeting attended by Junior Minister Kearney
17 December	Fifth meeting of UK-EU Joint Committee attended by First Minister and deputy First Minister
23 December	Exit Operations (XO) Committee attended by First Minister and deputy First Minister
28 December	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
29 December	Twenty-eighth meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (European Negotiations)

Date	Event
29 December	Exit Operations (XO) Committee attended by First Minister and Junior Minister Kearney.
30 December	Business Engagement Forum meeting attended by Junior Minister Kearney and Junior Minister Lyons
30 December	Exit Operations (XO) Committee attended by First Minister and Junior Minister Kearney

**Mr T Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in line with the guidelines issued for worship services, when restrictions will be lifted to allow wedding services to take place indoors.

**(AQW 5489/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Under the current restrictions in place 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.

Pre- and post-ceremony celebrations are not permitted. An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the resumption of post ceremony receptions or functions. The indicative date of 24 May is subject to review on 20 May.

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 Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what are the agreed terms of reference for the Joint Board established under New Decade, New Approach.

**(AQW 5892/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The agreed Terms of Reference for the Joint Board established under New Decade, New Approach are as follows:

#### Terms of Reference for the Joint Board

##### Purpose

- 1 As a condition of the UK Government's financial support for the Northern Ireland Executive alongside the New Decade, New Approach agreement, a Joint Board of the Executive and UK Government is to be convened.
- 2 The Joint Board does not replace the regular engagement between HM Treasury and the Northern Ireland Department of Finance reflecting the devolution settlement. The Board does, however, provide a regular opportunity for the Secretary of State, the First Minister and deputy First Minister; and other Ministers as appropriate, to review the use of NDNA funding and related issues, ensuring the conditions of the funding are met.
- 3 Its purpose is to:
  - to support the Northern Ireland Executive in establishing sound and stable governance that deliver for the people of Northern Ireland;
  - review funding provided by the UKG to meet commitments set out in the NDNA agreement;
  - support transformation in health, education and justice through the NDNA funding package; and
  - consider the effectiveness of infrastructure delivery, drawing on expertise from the Infrastructure and Projects Authority as appropriate.

##### Composition

- 4 The standing members of the Joint Board will be:
  - The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (who will convene the Joint Board)
  - The First Minister and deputy First Minister
- 5 Other Ministers from the UK Government and the NI Executive may be invited to attend as appropriate.
- 6 A small number of senior officials may attend in support of Ministers by agreement.

**Mr McNulty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will consider setting an indicative date for the reopening of public houses with no restaurant facilities in Northern Ireland, subject to regulations and local restrictions.

**(AQW 6472/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Outdoor areas at hospitality venues (cafes, restaurants, bars, pubs, social clubs, including in members' clubs) are currently permitted to open.

An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the reopening of indoor hospitality, for table service only. The indicative date of 24 May is subject to review on 20 May.

The latest restrictions 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 to detail the anticipated work programme for the junior Ministers.  
(AQW 7007/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Determination made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister under section 19 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 specifies that the function of the Junior Ministers is to assist the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the exercise of their functions in relation to the Executive Office.

**Ms Bailey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether musicians can perform music during a marriage ceremony in a non-religious venue that may also provide alcohol at other times; and (ii) if so, what restrictions, if any, are placed on this.

(AQW 8521/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Music is permitted during the marriage ceremony.

Numbers attending ceremonies in places of worship, a local government venue, or other venues such as hotels, are decided by risk assessment for the venue specific to a marriage/ civil partnership ceremony. This applies regardless of whether the ceremony is taking place indoors, outdoors, or at a place of worship.

Wedding and civil partnership receptions, celebrations and post ceremony gatherings are not permitted. An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the resumption of post ceremony receptions or functions.

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-weddings-and-civil-partnerships>

**Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether youth and community centres can remain open or are they required to close as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 11069/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Under the current restrictions community halls are allowed to remain open, but must adhere to current guidelines. This includes Public Health Agency guidance on social distancing and guidance on preventing the spread of the infection.

Currently up to 10 people (including children of all ages) from a maximum of two households can meet outdoors, and up to six people from a maximum of two households can meet in non-domestic indoor settings, for a permitted reason.

Youth Services began a phased return to face to face provision here from the 1 April 2021. Further information is available here - <https://www.youthonline.org.uk/restart/>

Further information can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

**Ms Hunter** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why churches have been allowed to open under COVID-19 restrictions for wedding ceremonies but not venues for humanist ceremonies.

(AQW 11528/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Venues are now open for wedding or civil partnership ceremonies. The numbers attending ceremonies in places of worship, a local government venue, or other venues such as hotels, are decided by risk assessment for the venue specific to a marriage/ civil partnership ceremony.

This applies regardless of whether the ceremony is taking place indoors, outdoors, or at a place of worship.

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 on 20 May.

The next review of the restrictions will take place on 10 June.

Further information on weddings and civil partnerships can be found using this link: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-weddings-and-civil-partnerships>

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why the report of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition has not been made public.

(AQW 14495/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** An Executive paper on progressing the FICT report was approved by the Executive on 25 March 2021.

Decisions on the publication of the FICT report and progressing recommendations in the action plan will be matters for all Executive Ministers working together.

A FICT working group, involving Junior Ministers, advisers and officials, are advancing the cross-departmental engagement to take this forward.

**Mr Muir** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether plans detailing the road map for relaxation for COVID-19 restrictions will cite regulations for specific sports such as golf.

**(AQW 15167/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Executive published Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions on Tuesday 2 March 2021, available here:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-pathway-out-restrictions>

Under the Pathway, golf falls under the Sports and Leisure Activities Pathway. Since 12 April, up to 15 people have been permitted to participate in outside activities such as playing golf.

Up to 15 people (including coaches) can take part in structured outdoor sports events, organised through clubs or individuals affiliated to recognised sports governing bodies or representative organisations for sport and physical activity.

An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the return of indoor group exercise and training (numbers informed by venue) and the full return of outdoor sport (with an overall limit of 500 spectators at outdoor sporting events). The indicative date of 24 May is subject to review on 20 May.

We will continuously monitor the impact of the decisions we make and only move to the next step when it is appropriate to do so. For now, club houses and indoor sports facilities (changing rooms, showers, kitchens, meeting rooms), apart from essential toilet facilities must remain closed.

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 Hilditch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the outdoor and spacious nature of typical garden centre premises and the current difficulties in bringing in horticultural goods from Great Britain, to detail the rationale for not including garden centres in the recently announced expansion of click and collect services.

**(AQW 15193/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** When the restrictions were reintroduced from 26 December 2020, click and collect for non-essential retail was not permitted. The Department for the Economy worked with the sector on how non-essential retail could reopen. All relaxations were to be introduced gradually to minimise the risk to public health and, if necessary, could be quickly reversed. On 2 March 2021 the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions.

The Executive introduced phase 1 of click and collect on 8th March 2021 for the sectors which were most likely to have become essential for people over time.

The re-opening of garden centres and plant nurseries for 'Click and Collect' was not supported in phase 1, as the goods they retailed were not as essential when compared to the other businesses permitted to reopen. To prioritise the re-opening of these premises would have created equity concerns amongst other non-essential retailers. It was also considered that to resume click and collect for garden centres before the reopening of schools would not be in keeping with the relative prioritisation the Executive had determined.

On 1 April 2021 the Executive agreed a range of relaxations which came into effect on 12 April including the reopening of Garden Centres and Plant Nurseries. As with other businesses, they were subject to the requirement to operate safely and to follow health and safety law and guidance and to take measures to keep staff and customers safe. On 15 April 2021 the Executive agreed that from 30 April all retail businesses were permitted to reopen.

Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

In this new process, the management of the changes to the restrictions regulations moved to the Executive Office (TEO).

TEO will now hold the lead responsibility and operational management of the process leading to Executive decisions on the ongoing need for restrictions and the requirement to amend the regulations.

This responsibility includes receiving and managing all proposals from Executive departments, management of the decision making process and facilitating consultation with departments on the drafting of amendment regulations. This work is supported by a Cross-Departmental Working Group, chaired by the Director of the TEO COVID-19 Taskforce team with membership from all 9 Departments and key stakeholders, including local government and PSNI.

The Executive, when making decisions on restrictions, takes into account the scientific and medical evidence and also the impacts of the restrictions on the economy and society. The Executive weighs up the totality of the effect each restriction can have in combination with other restrictions in reducing the rate of infections of COVID-19.

It is not always possible to disaggregate the precise impact on the rate of transmission of the virus in the community for each of the individual restrictions on their own.

Scientific evidence used by the Executive for decision making purposes is now publically available: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

**Mr McNulty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether they will clarify their position on the resumption of outdoor sports training; and (ii) whether gyms can organise outdoor training sessions by keeping to the limit of fifteen people. (AQW 16511/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Currently gyms, swimming pools and indoor leisure facilities may open for individual exercise and also one-to-one training/coaching with social distancing.

Up to 10 people (including children of all ages) from a maximum of two households can take part in unstructured outdoor exercise or sports activities. This might include football in the park or other leisure type activities.

Up to 15 people (including coaches) can take part in structured outdoor sports events, organised through clubs or individuals affiliated to recognised sports governing bodies or representative organisations for sport and physical activity.

Sports preparing for team competition may merge a small number of training groups to form a training squad but this squad size must be kept to the minimum number essential for this purpose.

Competitive outdoor sport can be organised by a club, individual or individuals affiliated, with numbers (including participants, officials, management and essential support personnel) not exceeding 100 and no spectators permitted.

Outdoor sports facilities can re-open but only to permit their use for those allowed in the regulations. Club houses and indoor sports facilities (changing rooms, showers, kitchens, meeting rooms), apart from essential toilet facilities must stay closed.

The return to sport protocols put in place by sports governing bodies should be strictly adhered to including hygiene measures, social distancing and other mitigations.

An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the return of indoor group exercise and training (numbers informed by venue) and the full return of outdoor sport (with an overall limit of 500 spectators at outdoor sporting events). The indicative date of 24 May is subject to review on 20 May.

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 McGrath** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on legislation to establish a Commissioner for the protection and enhancement of the Irish language in Northern Ireland as set out in New Decade, New Approach. (AQW 16526/17-22)

**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 official recognition of the status of the Irish Language by making provision 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, and to establish an Office of Identity and Cultural Expression and the Commission to enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition here.

We will progress the legislation during this mandate and the appointment of Commissioners as quickly as possible thereafter.

We will of course keep the Assembly updated on progress.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline whether gyms are able to hold outdoor fitness classes under the current COVID-19 regulations. (AQW 17103/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Currently gyms, swimming pools and indoor leisure facilities may open for individual exercise and also one-to-one training/ coaching with social distancing.

Up to 15 people (including coaches) can take part in structured outdoor sports events, organised through clubs or individuals affiliated to recognised sports governing bodies or representative organisations for sport and physical activity.

Outdoor sports facilities can re-open but only to permit their use for those allowed in the regulations. Club houses and indoor sports facilities (changing rooms, showers, kitchens, meeting rooms), apart from essential toilet facilities must stay closed.

The return to sport protocols put in place by sports governing bodies should be strictly adhered to including hygiene measures, social distancing and other mitigations.

An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the return of indoor group exercise and training (numbers informed by venue) and the full return of outdoor sport (with an overall limit of 500 spectators at outdoor sporting events). The indicative date of 24 May is subject to review on 20 May.

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 Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when instructors will be able to organise outdoor fitness classes. (AQW 17217/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Up to 10 people (including children of all ages) from a maximum of two households can take part in unstructured outdoor exercise or sports activities. This might include football in the park or other leisure type activities.

Up to 15 people (including coaches) can take part in structured outdoor sports events, organised through clubs or individuals affiliated to recognised sports governing bodies or representative organisations for sport and physical activity.

Outdoor sports facilities can re-open but only to permit their use for those allowed in the regulations. Club houses and indoor sports facilities (changing rooms, showers, kitchens, meeting rooms), apart from essential toilet facilities must stay closed.

The return to sport protocols put in place by sports governing bodies should be strictly adhered to including hygiene measures, social distancing and other mitigations.

An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the return of indoor group exercise and training (numbers informed by venue) and the full return of outdoor sport (with an overall limit of 500 spectators at outdoor sporting events). The indicative date of 24 May is subject to review on 20 May.

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 Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how much their Department has awarded to Irish language groups in each of the last three years; and (ii) to provide a breakdown of same. (AQW 17408/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Executive Office has awarded £127,315 to Irish Language groups in the last three financial years and all of this has been through the Urban Villages Initiative. A breakdown of funding is provided below. Please note the 2020/21 figures are still to be audited and may be subject to change.

Group	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	Total
Ionad na Fuisgeoige	£8,656	£8,856	£32,387	£49,899
TURAS and Ionad na Fuisgeoige	£15,925	£25,000	£12,491	£53,416
Iontabhas Bheann Mhadagain			£24,000	£24,000
<b>Totals</b>	<b>£24,581</b>	<b>£33,856</b>	<b>£68,878</b>	<b>£127,315</b>

**Miss Woods** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they plan to issue an indicative date for when parents can spectate at outdoor school sporting events and training. (AQW 17512/17-22)

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Department for Education is lead department for this area. The current restrictions outlined in The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 permit the resumption of outdoor extra-curricular schools' sports with effect from 14 April.

Indoor extra-curricular sports or inter-schools sports are not permitted at this time. There is no maximum number of participants specified within the regulations, however schools should seek to implement mitigating measures to ensure the safety of pupils and staff wherever possible, including the use of bubbles to reduce the number of close contacts each pupil has and by following the guidance set by the relevant sport's governing body.

An indicative date of 24 May has been given for the Schools to resume extra-curricular activities, indoor extra-curricular sports, outdoor inter-schools sports and day educational visits. The indicative date of 24 May is subject to review on 20 May.

An indicative date of 24 May has also been set for the return of indoor group exercise and training (numbers informed by venue) and the full return of outdoor sport (with an overall limit of 500 spectators at outdoor sporting events).

Further details on Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions can be found here: [executives-pathway-out-of-restrictions.pdf](https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/excoffice/executives-pathway-out-of-restrictions.pdf) (executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk) (<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/excoffice/executives-pathway-out-of-restrictions.pdf>)

**Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether training for deerstalking with appropriate safety measures in place can take place after 23 April 2021; and (ii) if not, when they anticipate it will be able to resume. (AQW 17562/17-22)



**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Currently up to 15 people (including coaches) can take part in structured outdoor sports training, through clubs or individuals affiliated to recognised sports governing bodies or representative organisations for sport and physical activity.

From 23 April, squad training can resume, as well as competitive outdoor sports. No spectators are permitted and numbers (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.

An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the return of indoor group exercise and training (numbers informed by 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>

**Mr Frew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as part of the easing of lockdown restrictions, whether deer stalking certificate training courses can take place from 23 April 2021.

**(AQW 17565/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Currently up to 15 people (including coaches) can take part in structured outdoor sports training, through clubs or individuals affiliated to recognised sports governing bodies or representative organisations for sport and physical activity.

From 23 April, squad training can resume, as well as competitive outdoor sports. No spectators are permitted and numbers (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.

An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the return of indoor group exercise and training (numbers informed by 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>

**Mr Frew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when can children's party businesses, offering structured birthday parties, open for business in both a commercial address and also remotely at a customer's address inside and outside.

**(AQW 17713/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** An indicative date of 24 May was announced for allowing the mixing of households in private dwellings and for the reopening of indoor hospitality venues and all tourism accommodation as well as the reopening of indoor visitor and cultural attractions, such as museums, galleries, cinemas and bingo halls.

From 24 May up to six people from no more than two households will be allowed to meet in a private dwelling and stay overnight. Children aged 12 and under are not counted in the total.

The indicative date of 24 May is subject to review on 20 May.

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 Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how smaller and rural towns such as Limavady will benefit from the High Street Task Force.

**(AQW 17727/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The terms of reference for the Task force include all cities, towns and villages, recognising the importance of high streets for rural communities, and the need for bespoke solutions.

**Mr Carroll** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have considered introducing a specific payment scheme to support hairdressers/barbers and other close contact services that are reopening.

**(AQW 17838/17-22)**

**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.

Close contact services including hairdressers and barbers re-opened here on 23 April 2021.

Financial support is available for businesses that have been required to close, or have had business activities at their premises directly curtailed by current health protection regulations. Information can be found here: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-support-businesses>

As part of emergency support measures agreed by the Executive in response to the Covid-19 crisis, specific sectors approved by the Executive will receive a full 12-month rates holiday from business rates for the entire financial year of 2021-22.

There are no plans to introduce any further specific financial support packages for close contact services at this time.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on NI Direct at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an indicative timeline for when the Summer Intervention Funds will be made to community and voluntary sector groups.

**(AQW 18112/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The assessment of applications for the 2021 Planned Interventions Programme is complete and Letters of Offer will issue to successful groups from 18 May.

**Mr Blair** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, for an update on the formation of the Citizens Assembly.

**(AQW 18197/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** A Citizen's Assembly, convened on an annual basis, will be one of the mechanisms used to explore issues recommended for examination by a Compact Civic Advisory Panel. Our priority will therefore be the reestablishment of the Panel to begin this process, which will be progressed in tandem with our assessment of its likely ability to function safely and effectively in a more stable policy environment.

**Mr Easton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when will the NI Executive be meeting to discuss any relaxation in travel restrictions to the rest of the United Kingdom.

**(AQW 18279/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** This matter was discussed by the Executive at its meeting of 13 May 2021, following which a statement was published on the agreed outcomes.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that outdoor sport is now permitted for up to 100 individuals, whether consideration will be given to similarly permitting outdoor wedding receptions for up to 100 individuals.

**(AQW 18286/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Under the current restrictions Competitive outdoor sport can be organised by a club, individual or individuals affiliated, with numbers (including participants, officials, management and essential support personnel) not exceeding 100 and no spectators permitted.

Outdoor sports facilities can re-open but only to permit their use for those allowed in the regulations. Club houses and indoor sports facilities (changing rooms, showers, kitchens, meeting rooms), apart from essential toilet facilities must stay closed.

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 on 20 May.

The next review of the restrictions will take place on 10 June.

Further information on weddings and civil partnerships can be found using this link: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-weddings-and-civil-partnerships>

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

**Mr McCrossan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the development of a Northern Ireland Violence Against Women and Girls strategy.

**(AQW 18413/17-22)**

**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, to this end, HOCS is considering information provided by Departments identifying all relevant work currently being taken forward. Consideration is also being given to how to resource this work. Despite this, it is worth noting that TEO does not have any direct statutory remit for this area.

Once resources are in place, we are committed to this work being taken forward at pace.

**Mr Durkan** asked the First and Deputy First Minister to publish a list of organisations that are funded by the Central Good Relations Fund, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18497/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Details of the groups funded through Central Good Relations Fund, in each of the last three years can be found in Annex A.

**Annex A****Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund in each of the last three years**

<b>2018/19</b> <b>Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund</b>	<b>2019/20</b> <b>Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund</b>	<b>2020/21</b> <b>Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund</b>
4 Corners Festival	All Nations Ministries	4 Corners Festival
Active Communities Network	Altnaveigh House Trust (2005) Ltd	5th Element NI
Altnaveigh House Trust (2005) Ltd	Ardoyne Youth Club	All Set cross-cultural Project
Annadale & Haywood Residents Association Ltd	Ards Development Bureau & Community Network	AnTobar Community Interest Company
Ardoyne Youth Club	Atlas Womens Centre	Ardoyne Youth Club
Ards Development Bureau & Community Network	Ballinamallard Fisher Park	Ards Development Bureau & Community Network
ArtsEkta	Banbridge Rugby Football Club	Artsawonder
Ballybeen Improvement Group	Barnardo's NI	Atlas Womens Centre
Barnardo's	BEAMA Education CIC	Ballynafeigh Unionist Forum
BEAMA Education CIC	Belfast Interface Project	Ballysillan Youth For Christ
Belfast Community Sports Development Network	Beyond Skin	Banbridge Rugby Football Club
Belfast Interface Project	Bloody Sunday Trust	Barnardo's
Border Arts 2000	Bogsides & Brandywell Initiative	BEAMA Education CIC
Boys & Girls Clubs (NI)	Building Communities Resource centre	Belfast Interface Project
Churchtown Community Association	Charter for NI	Causeway Rural & Urban Network
Cinemagic	Churchtown Community Association	Charter for Northern Ireland
Clonard Monastery Youth Centre	Cinemagic	City of Derry Rugby Football Club
Coiste na nIarchimi	Coa O'Dwyer's GFC	Cloughmills Community Action Team
Colin Glen Trust	Colin Glen Trust	Coiste na nIarchimí
Community Watersports Co. CIC	Community Relations in Schools	Community Dialogue
Co-operation Ireland	Co-Operation Ireland	Community Restorative Justice Newry Armagh
County Down Rural Community Network	Corrymeela Community	Community Sports Network
Creggan Preschool & Training Trust	County Armagh Grand Orange Lodge Community Development Committee Ltd	Co-operation Ireland
Crewe United Football & Sports Club	Creggan Enterprises	Creggan Country Park Enterprises Ltd
Crossfire Trust CROSA	Crewe United Football & Sports Club	Creggan Enterprises Ltd
Crusaders Football Club	Cycul	Crewe United Football & Social Club
Derry & District Youth Association Foyle Cup	Derry & District Youth Foyle Cup	CRIS-Community Relations In Schools
Dun Uladh	Down Gaelic Athletic	Cycul Ltd
Duncairn Community Partnership	Dundrum Cricket Club	Drumaness Snooker Club
Dundrum Cricket Club	Dun Uladh	Drumquin Historical Society

<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
<b>Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund</b>	<b>Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund</b>	<b>Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund</b>
Early Years - the organisation for young children	Eastside Arts	Dun Uladh
EastSide Arts	Edenderry Rural Community Group	Erne East Community Partnership Limited
Eastside Partnership	Erne East Community Partnership	Falls Community Council
Erne East Community Partnership Ltd	Ethnic Minority Police Association (EMPA)	Féile an Phobail
Extern NI	Fáilte Feirste Thiar	Fighting Words Belfast
Falls Community Council	Falls Community Council	Forthspring InterCommunity Group
Falls Women's Centre	Fall's Women's Centre	FOR YOUR FREEDOM & OURS CIC
Féile an Phobail	Féile an Phobail	Harmony Community Trust
Foyle Women's Information Network	First Steps Womens Centre	Galbally Youth and Community Association
Galliagh Women's Group	Fivemiletown Utd FC	Galliagh Womens Group
GLOW	Forthspring Inter Community Group	Greater Shantallow Community Arts
Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland	Foyle Womens Network	In your space
Greater Shantallow Community Arts	Friends of Portaferry Presbyterian Church	Intercomm Ireland Ltd
Harmony Community Trust	Galbally Youth & Community Association	Irish FA Foundation
Healing Through Remembering (HTR)	Greater Shantallow Community Arts	Kilcooley Community Forum LTD
Hope 4 UR Life Ltd, Trading as Hope4LifeNI	Greater Village Regeneration Trust	Killynure Community Association
In Your Space Circus	Groundwork NI	Lakeland Community Care Ltd
Intercomm Ireland Ltd	Hanover Youth Football Club	Larne YMCA LTD
Kilcooley Womens Centre	Harmony Community Trust	Lisburn Peoples Support Project
Kinship Care Northern Ireland	Hope 4 UR Life Ltd, Trading as Hope 4 Life NI	Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group
Larne YMCA	Intercomm Ireland Ltd	New Lodge Arts
Lisburn Distillery Football Club	Irish FA Foundation	North West Migrants Forum
Lisburn PSP	Kilcooley Women's Centre	North West Play Resource Centre (The Playhouse)
Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group	Larne YMCA	Northern Ireland Netball
Museum of Free Derry (Bloody Sunday Trust)	Lisbellaw Utd Football Club	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
New Lodge Arts	Lisburn Distillery Football Club	Omagh Community House
North Belfast Interface Network as lead partner for Twaddell Ardoyne Shankill Communities in Transition	Lisnaskea Rovers Football Club	Passionist Peace and Reconciliation Office
Northern Ireland Rural Development Council	Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group	PeacePlayers International -NorthernIreland
North West Migrants Forum	Netball Northern Ireland	Positive Steps Community Centre
PeacePlayers International - Northern Ireland	New Lodge Arts	Prime Cut Productions

<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
<b>Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund</b>	<b>Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund</b>	<b>Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund</b>
Quaker Service	Nigerian Community Northern Ireland	Quaker Service
Rainbow Child and Family Centre	North Belfast Interface Network(NBIN) as lead partner for Twaddell Ardoyne Shankill Communities in Transition (TASCIT)	Rainbow Child And Family Centre
REACH Across	North West Migrants Forum	Smashing Times Theatre Company
Roe Valley Residents Association	Northern Ireland Youth Forum	South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF)
Rural Area Partnership in Derry (RAPID)	North-West Cultural Partnership (NWCP)	Sport Changes Life Foundation
Saint Ciarans Connected	North West Play Resource Centre	Springboard Opportunities Limited
Santos Football Club	Omagh Community House	St Canice's GAC
Shankill Women's Centre	Parents' Association, Rasharkin PS	St Mary's YC
South Armagh Rural Women's Network	Playing for the Future	St Matthew's Football Club
Specialisterne Northern Ireland	PeacePlayers International - Northern Ireland	Stadium Projects
Springboard Opportunities Ltd	Prime Cut Productions	Sticky Fingers Arts
St Columbs Park Reconciliation Trust	Rainbow Child and Family Centre	Tackling Awareness of Mental Health Issues - TAMHI
St Mary's Youth Centre	Reach Across	Tar Anall
Sticky Fingers Arts	Rural Community Network	Tar Isteach
Suffolk Lenadood Interface Group - SLIG	Rural Area Partnership in Derry (RAPID)	The Bytes Project
Tackling Awareness of Mental Health Issues (TAMHI)	Saint Ciaran's Connected	The Churches Trust Ltd
Tar Anall	South Armagh Women's Rural Network (SAWRN)	The Corrymeela Community
Tar Isteach	Specialisterne	The Junction CR and Peace Building Initiative
The Cathedral Youth Club	Sport Changes Life Foundation	The Ryan McBride Foundation
The Churches Trust Ltd	Springboard Opportunities Ltd	The Somme Association
The HUBB Community Development Resource Centre	Star Neighbourhood Centre	Trademark Training
THE JUNCTION: Community Relations and Peace Building Initiative	St Columbs Park Reconciliation Trust	Training for Women Network Limited
The Playhouse	St Mary's Youth Centre	Ulster Badminton Branch Union of Ireland
Training for Women Network (TWN)	St Matthew's Football Club	Ulster Hockey Union
Tristar Boys Football Club	T.A.M.H.I. - Tackling Awareness of Mental Health Issues	Ulster Project
Ulster GAA	Tar Anall	Voices Women's Group
Ulster Rugby	Tar Isteach	Volunteer Now
Voluntary Arts Ireland	The Bytes Project	Wheelworks
Volunteer Now	The Churches Trust Ltd	Young at Art Ltd

2018/19 Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund	2019/20 Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund	2020/21 Organisations funded by the Central Good Relations Fund
WheelWorks	The HUBB Community Development Resource Centre	Youth Link NI
WOMEN'S TEC	The Junction: Community Relations & Peace Building	Youth Sport Omagh
Youth Initiatives	The Playhouse - North West Play Resource Centre	Zanshin Shotokan Karate Club
Youth Sport Omagh	Training for Women Network	
Zanshin Shotokan Karate Club	Ulster Badminton	
	Ulster GAA	
	Ulster Rugby	
	Volunteer Now	
	West Belfast Partnership Board	
	West Kirk Community Project	
	Wheelworks	
	Women's TEC	
	Youth Initiatives NI	
	Youth Link: NI	
	Youth Sport Omagh	
	Zanshin Shotokan Karate Club	
<b>Total – 94 Organisations</b>	<b>Total – 105 Organisations</b>	<b>Total – 92 Organisations</b>

**Mr McGrath** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what engagement they have had with the NIO regarding the commitment of the UK Government to bring forward funding to implement the Stormont House Agreement proposals to address Northern Ireland legacy issues, as set out in New Decade, New Approach.

**(AQW 18563/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** We have not engaged jointly on behalf of the Executive Office with the NIO regarding the commitment of the UK Government to bring forward funding in relation to these issues.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the increase in outdoor gathering numbers to 500, scheduled from 24 May, extends to marching band parades.

**(AQW 18912/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The increase in outdoor gathering numbers to 500 is subject to review on 20 May. Any gatherings of over 30 people must be an organised gathering and would require a risk assessment. We would advise organisers to consider the use of Lateral Flow Tests for any planned larger events.

More detailed guidance relating to gatherings, hospitality and travel are available 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>)

## Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how much annual funding his Department provides to the Woodland Trust.

**(AQW 15178/17-22)**

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** The Woodland Trust does not receive any annual core funding from my Department, however it receives funding through various schemes delivered by DAERA.

During the financial year 20/21 the Woodland Trust received £185,000 made up of: £165,000 under the Forest Expansion Scheme to support new native woodland;

£2,000 of forestry grant premia payment for a number of community woodlands; and £18,000 to support a project called 'A landscape rich in native trees and woodland for wildlife and people' under the Multi-year Strategic Strand of the Environment Fund.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what progress has been made in allowing the free movement of guide dogs, and other similar types of working dogs, between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 17507/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** As a result of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Northern Ireland 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, including assistance and working dogs, between or into EU Member States, continues to apply in Northern Ireland (NI), following the end of the transition phase.

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, hobby breeders, and the potential impact on tourism for those wishing to holiday in NI or return to NI from Great Britain (GB) accompanied by their pets.

I have therefore 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. The Commission has responded and technical discussions are ongoing. In the interim, I will continue engagement with Ministerial colleagues to urgently seek derogations where possible from these unnecessary additional requirements.

I have also confirmed, after exploring potential flexibilities, and considering pet owners have not had time to familiarise themselves with the new rules, that DAERA would delay the introduction of any checks on compliance with the EU rules on pet travel from GB to NI until 1 July 2021. As a result, there will be no routine checks on travellers' compliance, until then.

My Department is currently considering the next steps with regards this issue. The present position is set out in the Department's Compliance protocol, available [/www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/compliance-protocol-sanitary-phytosanitary-controls-and-point-entry-marketing-standards-checks-gb-ni](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/compliance-protocol-sanitary-phytosanitary-controls-and-point-entry-marketing-standards-checks-gb-ni).

It is my hope, however, that from the discussions and processes outlined above, sensible and pragmatic solutions can be found before then.

Any progress made or flexibilities agreed in respect of the additional requirements, along with any changes to the current enforcement approach will be published on the DAERA website <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/travelling-pets> on the DAERA Frequently Asked Questions document

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/qas-pet-travel-1-january-2021>

and communicated widely through our usual Departmental media channels.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many staff have been working in the Forest Service, in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 17923/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Forest Service have employed the following number of staff over the last 5 years:

- 2016-17, 215;
- 2017-18, 214;
- 2018-19, 207;
- 2019-20, 210; and
- 2020-21, 212.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail on the outcome of the 2016 Areas of Special Scientific Interest condition target.

**(AQW 18054/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** 'Valuing Nature: A Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020' was published by the then Department of the Environment in 2015. This did not include an ASSI condition target.

The strategy did contain a commitment to undertake Protected Site Monitoring as an ongoing action. NIEA continues to carry out an annual programme of monitoring of features within Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs). We report ASSI condition annually through the Northern Ireland Environmental Statistics Report.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how much funding has been set aside by his Department and its arm's-length bodies to celebrate the Northern Ireland Centenary.  
**(AQW 18107/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** DAERA submitted a bid to the New Decade New Approach (NDNA) Unique Circumstances funding at the end of 2020. The bid included £1,850,000 over a period of four years to 2025, for use in Centenary events and activities. However, this funding opportunity was not included in the Final Budget outcome.

DAERA has developed a calendar of events to be taken forward through existing work programmes and budgets, under Northern Ireland Centenary branding, with an estimated value of £733,000. This includes enhancements to the accessibility of the DAERA estate, improvements to facilities at Country Parks and delivery of the Northern Ireland Food Programme.

In addition DAERA has identified a number of specific events to mark the Northern Ireland Centenary, including new woodland planting, student bursaries and environmental projects, supported by a media campaign. An initial £40,000 has been secured for this. I am, however, keeping this under review, as I am keen to do more throughout the year.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what mechanisms exist to compensate beekeepers and growers should the Small Hive Beetle become established into Northern Ireland.  
**(AQW 18163/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The Bees (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 (the Order) sets out my Department's regulatory function to prevent the introduction and spread of pests or diseases affecting bees. The Order specifies control and eradication measures to be undertaken by the Department and beekeepers in the event of a finding of a notifiable pest or disease including the Small Hive Beetle.

Bee hives and colonies are not currently required to be registered by beekeepers in NI. In the absence of compulsory registration mechanisms, the payment of compensation for losses resulting from the application of control measures under the Order is not possible.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail any plans he has to engage with the Department for the Economy to explore farm diversification options with farmers.  
**(AQW 18173/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Officials are currently finalising a draft Rural Policy Framework which will inform the need for support for rural communities and businesses going forward. I hope to be in apposition to launch an 8 week online consultation on this framework before the summer. It is too early to say what schemes will be required as part of a support programme but I'm sure there will be opportunities to assist farmers diversifying into non-agricultural activities. Officials will engage with relevant stakeholders, including the Department for the Economy, in developing future support.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to outline the current position with the implementation of the Voisinage Agreement; and (ii) why are South Down inshore fishermen still suffering restraints.  
**(AQW 18183/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The Voisinage Agreement is still in place. This is a neighbourhood agreement between RoI and Northern Ireland and is outside the scope of the fisheries agreement within the Trade and Co-operation Agreement between the UK and the EU. However, under the UK and EU licensing arrangements for third country vessels operating in each other's waters, we are required to exchange lists of vessels requiring access so that authorisations can be issued by the UK and the EU to vessels requiring reciprocal access.

Under the RoI Maritime and Jurisdiction Act 2006 as amended by the Sea-Fisheries (Amendment) Act 2019, a Northern Ireland (NI) vessel is required to be "owned and operated" in NI to avail of Voisinage access to the Irish 0-6 nautical mile area. Further information has been requested by the EU to confirm that all the vessels we have listed as requiring EU authorisations are eligible under the Irish Act.

We have responded to this request and are seeking a meeting with Irish officials to resolve any remaining issues. In the meantime, we have not authorised any RoI vessels to fish within our 0-6nm area.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will publish statistics for the 2019/20 year on municipal waste collected by local councils (i) that was exported to be treated or for disposal, including the countries to which it was exported; and (ii) that was sent to Great Britain to be treated or for disposal.  
**(AQW 18205/17-22)**



**Mr Poots:** Whilst local authority collected municipal waste are broken down in several ways on the Departments website, see links below

- <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-local-authority-collected-municipal-waste-management-statistics>
- <https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/daera/northern-ireland-waste-management-statistics.html>

they are not currently broken down geographically by destination, however, in 2019-20:

- (i) The quantity and proportion of local authority collected municipal waste exported for treatment (either recovery or disposal) was 175,921 Tonnes (17.6%). This was reported as being exported to the following (alphabetically ordered) countries; Belgium, Benin, Cameroon, China, Denmark, Gabon, Germany, Ghana, Greece, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Ivory Coast, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, USA and Vietnam.
- (ii) The quantity and proportion of local authority collected municipal waste sent to Great Britain for treatment (either recovery or disposal) was 59,862 Tonnes (6.0%).

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what proportion and quantities of municipal waste in 2019/20 was (i) sent to landfill; (ii) incinerated; (iii) processed in other ways; and (iv) sent elsewhere for disposal or treatment, broken down by local council.

**(AQW 18206/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:**

- (iii) The quantity and proportion of local authority collected municipal waste sent for incineration (with energy recovery) in 2019-20 was 220,978 Tonnes (22.1%).
- (iv) The quantity and proportion of local authority collected municipal waste sent for landfill in 2019-20 was 240,220 Tonnes (24.0%).
- (v) The quantity and proportion of local authority collected municipal waste processed in other ways but not sent for incineration nor sent to landfill in 2019-20 was 537,787 Tonnes (53.9%).

These figures given in (i) – (iii), along with their breakdown by District Council, are already reported in Tables 3 & 4 of the LAC municipal waste data tables: 2019-20 published on the Departments website (link below)

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-local-authority-collected-municipal-waste-management-statistics-2019>

- (vi) The quantity and proportion of local authority collected municipal waste (LACMW) sent elsewhere i.e. outside of Northern Ireland for treatment (recovery or disposal) by each Council in 2019-20 is shown in the table below:

<b>Council</b>	<b>LACMW sent elsewhere (Tonnage)</b>	<b>LACMW sent elsewhere as a % of LACMW arisings</b>
Antrim & Newtownabbey	11,275	11.0%
Ards & North Down	8,955	10.3%
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	33,571	31.5%
Belfast	26,957	16.0%
Causeway Coast & Glens	17,017	20.9%
Derry City & Strabane	18,615	22.9%
Fermanagh & Omagh	12,873	23.3%
Lisburn & Castlereagh	6,843	8.7%
Mid & East Antrim	8,137	11.0%
Mid Ulster	41,956	52.7%
Newry, Mourne & Down	49,584	58.6%

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQW 16422/17-22, to detail how the decision to halt work was communicated to contractors.

**(AQW 18229/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** In consultation with DAERA Officials, Construction and Procurement Delivery (Department of Finance), issued an instruction to the contractors advising them to move to a controlled stop on 02 April 2021.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 16422/17-22, (i) for an update on any costs his Department has determined thus far associated with the halting of work, including for consultants, engineers and other services; and (ii) whether this issue has been raised at Executive.

**(AQW 18230/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Further to AQW 16422/17-22 and the instruction issued to the contractors on 2 April 2021 advising them to move to a controlled stop DAERA have not received any contractor compensation claims to date.

The controlled stop, which triggered a compensation event was for an initial period of six weeks and was extended for a further three weeks on 6 May 2021. Full costs associated with the controlled stop will be clear following further scoping work and discussions with contractors. Further clarity will also be provided when compensation claims are received and any adjudication process completed.

Any additional costs incurred in relation to these works will be captured in the development of the Full Business Case (FBC). As the proposals will be significant, cross-cutting and controversial, following completion of the FBC, I intend to take options for consideration and decision to the Northern Ireland Executive.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQW 15655/17-22, which are the competent authorities referred to in the answer provided.

**(AQW 18247/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Further to AQW 15655/17-22, you have sought clarification regarding the Competent Authorities (CAs) referred to in the answer provided.

Under the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement, the NI Protocol and European Union law, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the various local authorities as outlined within Section Two of the Department's Compliance Protocol, are designated as Competent Authorities for the delivery of Official Controls.

The various Competent Authorities and their respective statutory responsibilities for the official controls and checks on the different consignment types are detailed in Section Two of DAERA's Compliance Protocol, which is available at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/compliance-protocol-sanitary-phytosanitary-controls-and-point-entry-marketing-standards-checks-gb-ni>.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to detail any byelaws, or other regulations made by his Department, or local councils, that prohibit the lighting of fires on land and that would apply to land owned by NIEA as per the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; and (ii) to outline how any such legislation is enforced.

**(AQW 18264/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department has not made any byelaws or other regulations under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 as amended that prohibit the lighting of fires. Councils also have separate powers to enact byelaws and my Department does not hold this information.

It would be a matter for the designated authority to investigate and to enforce any offences under the terms of the relevant legislation.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQW 17100/17-22, to detail the number of enforcement actions taken against these incidents.

**(AQW 18311/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:**

- While the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's waste enforcement activity focuses primarily on large scale waste offending, it will assist District Councils with action against suspected fly tippers, where the waste material is more than 20m<sup>3</sup> in volume, or involves hazardous wastes such as asbestos and the residue from fuel laundering. In doing so, it utilises a number of enforcement tools, the nature of which will depend on the volume and type of material involved and if the activity is a first-time offence or otherwise.
- Enforcement actions employed by NIEA's Enforcement Branch in respect of small scale waste offending such as fly-tipping includes advice and warning letters, statutory notices to remove the waste (Article 27) and fixed penalty notices (FPNs) of £300 or £400. For non-payment of FPNs, or offending that presents a greater threat to the environment or human health, evidence will be presented to the PPS with a view to prosecution.
- Details of NIEA's fly tipping enforcement action since 2018 are set out in the table below:

	2018	2019	2020	2021 to date
Advice & Guidance	1	3	N/A	N/A
Warning Letters	8	7	7	12
Article 27 notices	8	33	54	23

	2018	2019	2020	2021 to date
Fixed Penalty Notice	2	12	12	1

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to provide an estimated timeframe for the financial support package aimed at farmers in the Sperrins.

**(AQW 18312/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My officials are currently developing the administrative systems and progressing the legislation required to support the scheme and allow the financial support to be paid out.

Given competing priorities within the Department, it is likely to be summer of 2021 before the scheme will open and applications can be made. This is subject to referral and approval by the Statutory Committee, and legislation being laid before the Assembly by the summer recess.

Further information will be published on the Department's website in the next few weeks.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will reinstate the ANC payments for Northern Ireland farmers.

**(AQW 18314/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I have previously stated in the Assembly that my desire is to support all farmers; no farmer should be left behind. I have no plans to reintroduce an Areas of Natural Constraint (ANC) measure. This is an old CAP measure that has little to offer in terms of moving the industry forward. We need to look to the future rather than recreate the past.

Therefore rather than reintroducing a second area based payment I would rather focus efforts on devising schemes and support measures that are good for all farmers.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to detail all actions taken by his Department and arm's-length bodies concerning the fish kill incident in the Aghlish River; and (ii) to outline the identified impact of the pollution incident on fish stocks in the river.

**(AQW 18341/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:**

- (i) On Sunday 2 May the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) received information through the 24 hour pollution hotline advising of a fish kill on the Aghlish River, near Dromore, County Tyrone.

Loughs Agency (LA) are the lead investigating agency for this incident and they recognize that any major incident inevitably diverts staff from previously planned work and impacts on their limited resources. However, given the importance of this river, especially in relation to juvenile fish and the wider Foyle system, appropriate efforts have and will continue to be made to ensure a professional and comprehensive investigation.

As for the Northern Environment Agency (NIEA) staff in my Department are currently analysing the water samples that were taken following the incident and are undertaking a river invertebrate survey to assist with the investigation. My officials will continue to assist LA as and when required.

- (ii) The main fatalities have been determined to be mainly native brown trout, however juvenile Atlantic salmon of different year classes have also perished. In addition, LA staff recorded dead minnows, sticklebacks and stone loach. It is assumed that any other species such as European eels and lamprey resident in this stretch would also have been killed.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department currently provides any grant schemes for landowners with a spring well on their property.

**(AQW 18351/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department operates a number of grant schemes for landowners. The scope of a number of these schemes relates to measures to protect the environment, including improving biodiversity and water quality. At present there are no specific schemes for landowners with a spring well on their property, however those individuals may be recipients of funding through one of the other schemes.

My Officials are planning to undertake a scoping exercise of the current use of private water supplies as a drinking water source in Northern Ireland and to establish a baseline position on the quality and resilience of such supplies with a view to informing future policy in this area.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what incentives are available to farmers to farm in an environmentally green and clean way.

**(AQW 18362/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Protecting and enhancing our environment is a key priority for my Department and a range of related support measures are in place for farmers.

The Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) supports farmers and land managers to implement environmentally beneficial actions and works on agricultural land. It aims to protect and enhance biodiversity and water quality, and mitigate against climate change by sequestering carbon. After four annual intake tranches some 5,000 farmers are participating in the scheme and two further tranches are planned for this year and next. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) also delivers training for all EFS participants.

Through the Farm Business Improvement Scheme (FBIS) capital support is available to help farmers invest in a range of equipment which deliver environmental benefits. In particular, technologies such as Low Emissions Slurry Spreading Equipment (LESSE) which reduces the ammonia and water quality impacts of slurry spreading. All investments funded under FBIS-Capital have been assessed for their potential environmental impacts, and applications which included environmental improvements have been prioritised. While the FBIS-Capital scheme is currently closed for applications, I am considering what further capital support can be provided under both tiers of the scheme, and within the Future Agricultural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland, which will be launched in the coming months.

CAFRE delivers Knowledge Transfer, Innovation and Technology Transfer programmes which aim to improve future performance, sustainability and resilience of the agri-food industry.

CAFRE also deals directly with farmers through Business Development Groups, which provide a training forum that allows sharing of peer-to-peer knowledge with the aim of improving technical efficiency and environmental performance. Environmentally beneficial farming practices are a key component of the Environmental Business Development Groups.

My Department offers a soil sampling service and training for farmers which provides them with detailed information on their soils, such as pH level and nutrient requirements. By optimising pH and applying slurry, manure and chemical fertiliser in line with crop need, farmers can maximise crop yields, increase soil fertility and increase farm profitability, while also improving environmental performance.

My Department supports carbon sequestration and storage through the creation of new woodlands and the management of existing woodlands by providing grant aid towards the cost of the work.

In addition, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is working with a number of partners to develop a series of conservation management plans for the majority of our Special Areas of Conservation. These plans will help to inform what conservation measures, environmental works and farming practices are required for the maintenance and restoration on these sites.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the full extent of capital works carried out either directly (i) by his Department; or (ii) by the UK Government to facilitate checks at ports in Northern Ireland. **(AQW 18390/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** DAERA has implemented temporary Point of Entry contingency arrangements at Belfast, Larne and Warrenpoint by January 2021 to ensure day one readiness. Contingency arrangements were also completed in February 2021 at Foyle Point of Entry.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail any capital investment carried out at the AFBI facilities in Loughgall; (ii) New Forge Lane; and (iii) Crossnacreevy in each of the last four years. **(AQW 18391/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Capital investment by my Department at AFBI facilities at Loughgall, Newforge Lane and Crossnacreevy in each of the last four years is detailed in the table below. This includes capital investment in estate infrastructure, equipment, ICT and fleet.

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Loughgall	23,283	27,666	21,756	50,072
Newforge Lane	1,147,871	2,226,056	1,459,104	550,599
Crossnacreevy	0	0	115369	0

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail any capital investment proposals or business cases he is considering for the AFBI facilities at (i) Loughgall; (ii) New Forge Lane; and (iii) Crossnacreevy. **(AQW 18392/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I am currently not considering any capital investment proposals or business cases for the AFBI facilities at (i) Loughgall; (ii) New Forge Lane; and (iii) Crossnacreevy.

However, there are also a number of smaller value capital investment proposals that are being taken forward by my Department under delegated limits.

**Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the adequacy of health inspections carried out in Italy to prevent fully the transfer and introduction of Small Hive Beetle into Northern Ireland via packages of honey bees.

**(AQW 18402/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Apiculture trade within the European Union (EU) is tightly governed by EU legislation designed to prevent the spread of harmful pests and diseases which could spread via trade in animals and animal by-products. Bees or bee by products can only move between Member States if accompanied by valid health certificates.

As part of this, intensified checks for Small Hive Beetle, *Tropilaelaps* spp. and American foulbrood must be carried out at the point of origin. Only where the consignment is confirmed to be free from pests and diseases, a health certificate which travels with the consignment until its point of destination may be issued.

The National Reference Centre for Beekeeping of the Italian Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie confirmed the first detection of Small Hive Beetle (*Aethina tumida*) in a bait trap in the town of Gioia Tauro, in the Italian province of Reggio Calabria on 11 September 2014. Two months later, on 7 November 2014, the national reference centre for beekeeping reported the first case of *Aethina tumida* in the province of Siracusa, in Sicily.

Italian authorities opted for an eradication policy, under which any infested hives are destroyed and the surrounding soil is treated. Within the space of three months a further sixty apiaries were found to be infected across the region of Calabria.

An incursion into the region of Sicily was also discovered and eradicated.

Five years later, on 20 June 2019, an apiary was found infested with *Aethina tumida* in the municipality of Lentini, in the province of Siracusa. The epidemiological investigation carried out by the Veterinary Services identified its origin as an unauthorized movement of beehives from Calabria to Sicily. The same control and surveillance measures already applied previously were therefore adopted and a protection area of 5 km radius around the outbreak was established, always with the support of sentinel honey bee nuclei.

Intensive surveillance continues in the Region of Calabria and in the surrounding areas, by means of colony inspections and sentinel nuclei. There has been no further evidence of spread.

To date these measures and the pre-export checks carried out by the Italian authorities have been effective in preventing any further spread of *Aethina tumida* across the EU including, before EU exit, the entirety of the UK.

**Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether every package of honey bees imported into Northern Ireland from Italy will be checked for the presence of Small Hive Beetle at the point of dispatch and the point of arrival in NI.

**(AQW 18403/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Honey bees imported into NI from Italy are subject to pre-notification, documentary checks and physical checks at the place of destination. Consignments are required to be accompanied by an Animal Health Certificate, issued by the competent authority at the point of despatch in the country of origin. Animal Health Certificates attest that bees are free from American Foulbrood, Small Hive Beetle (*Aethina tumida*) and *Tropilaelaps* mite (*Tropilaelaps* spp.).

Pre-notification of the arrival of these consignments from Italy, enables the Department to make provision for DAERA Inspectors to inspect these consignments of honeybees imported into NI from Italy. Inspections include a visual inspection with samples taken for analysis to establish freedom from Small Hive Beetle.

**Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of whether his Department's Bee Health Inspectorate is sufficiently well resourced to fully and thoroughly check three individual consignments of over 500 packages of honey bees imported from the EU to NI.

**(AQW 18404/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Bees moving within the EU and including EU to NI are subject to EU official controls. Movement of bees into NI requires pre-notification to DAERA and consignments to be accompanied by an Animal Health Certificate, issued by the competent authority of the country of origin.

Pre-notification enables the Department to determine the risk associated with origin of the consignments, the appropriate level of inspection and resources required to be allocated. For example, currently consignments originating from Italy, where Small Hive Beetle is present, are considered high risk and subject to 100% physical inspections.

The Department determines the resource needs for this work, as it does for its wider inspection programmes, on an ongoing basis taking account of the level of risk and volume of inspections to be met.

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQO 1978/17-22, to detail the number of successful prosecutions, broken down by year.

**(AQW 18426/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The data requested pursuant to AQO 1978/17-22 is summarised in the table below:

Year	Number of Cases	Date of Incident Range
2017	21	2014-2017
2018	18	2016-2017
2019	14	2016-2019
2020	7	2018-2019
2021	3	2018-2019

An incident investigation will begin in a specific year, but investigative time, case preparation and court proceedings may result in a different year for commencement and eventual completion of a prosecution case. The final column highlights the date spread of the commencement of the cases concluded in any particular year.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the steps taken, and planned, to restore coastal habitats in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18441/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The Northern Ireland marine protected area network plays an important role in protecting and restoring coastal habitats, and my Department's current focus is on establishing effective management across the network.

Research has been commissioned by my Department from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) that will identify the impacts of future climate change scenarios on the coastal habitats of Northern Ireland. Coastal habitats which are considered to be at risk will be identified and by using the best available evidence this project will identify practical ways to develop adaptation measures to protect and restore vulnerable coastal habitats. Findings from this research will inform future management and restoration activities for coastal habitats.

Coastal habitats, including saltmarsh, seagrass and shellfish beds, are important carbon stores and are referred to as blue carbon habitats. To assess the feasibility of blue carbon habitat restoration in Northern Ireland, my Department provided grant funding to Ulster Wildlife. This project will inform the development of future restoration projects. My Department is also working with potential delivery partners to develop proposals to restore blue carbon habitats and other coastal habitats. In addition to restoring degraded habitats, these proposals will include activities for protected species, improving water quality and reducing marine litter.

To help support nature recovery, I recently launched the 2021-22 DAERA Environment Fund - Green Recovery Challenge Fund. The restoration of priority marine habitats, and the development of nature based climate change mitigation and adaptation solutions, such as increased natural shoreline resilience to address coastal erosion, are included as environmental priorities within this Challenge Fund. Successful projects will help support the restoration of marine and coastal habitats and ecosystems in Northern Ireland. Further information can be found at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/environment-fund>

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will address coastal erosion in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18442/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** It is widely recognised that current policy in this area is outdated, and that the absence of specific legislation in Northern Ireland on managing coastal change, and specifically coastal erosion has resulted in a lack of data on the state of our coastline, and how it is changing over time. It has also resulted in a lack of co-ordinated and targeted investment.

I recently met with the Infrastructure Minister, Nichola Mallon to discuss coastal change and future arrangements for the Coastal Forum, a group set up by previous Ministers as a mechanism through which coastal management issues are being progressed. The Forum has previously been chaired by Ministers and comprises of the Chief Executives of coastal councils, and the NI Director of the National Trust, with ready access to expert academic advice as required.

The Forum has devised a comprehensive Work Programme, assisted by a Working Group. The priority objective for the Forum is to address the significant gaps in our coastline data and provide a reliable evidence base and vulnerability assessment for effective future coastal management. New policy will also need to be developed. In the interim, the Forum has provided decision makers with a position paper outlining current policy and best practice for Northern Ireland. My Department has commissioned a LiDAR survey which will provide a detailed baseline survey of the entire Northern Ireland coast and is developing further project proposals to enhance the evidence base.

The Forum is due to meet soon to consider the good progress on the Work Programme to date, to be followed by a further meeting before the end of the year which I and Minister Mallon will co-chair.

DfI and DAERA staff have been collaborating closely on a range of coastal issues for some time and are currently working with Irish colleagues on securing funding from the PEACE+ programme on Marine and Coastal Management. If the North-South proposal is funded, this could deliver a significant element of the investment needed to progress the proposed Coastal Forum Work Programme.

As survey data becomes available, and expert analysis is provided to the Coastal Forum for consideration, DAERA and DfI will be collectively able to determine and implement coastal management policies which are fit for purpose and based specifically on the geography of the Northern Ireland coast.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the steps taken, and planned, to restore heathlands in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18443/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department has a range of measures in place to restore, maintain and protect heathlands in Northern Ireland.

The Environmental Farming Scheme offers support to farmers and land managers to maintain and enhance the environmental quality of various heathland habitats through appropriate management regimes. Previous agri-environment schemes also offered similar support.

In addition to support for the maintenance and restoration of heathlands through EFS, my Department also works closely with key stakeholders on the implementation of an INTERREG Va project for managing sensitive heathland habitats at Cuilcagh Mountain SAC. My Department is planning to support further restoration activities through the development of the PEACE+ programme, which aims to build on this work and expand through Nature Recovery Networks.

My Department is also developing a series of Conservation Management Plans which aim to identify the habitat types across the majority of the Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) within Northern Ireland. After assessing pressures and threats and close engagement with key stakeholders, these plans will outline the necessary conservation measures for maintenance and restoration of habitat types, including heathlands.

The Department also ensures protection of Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI), including those with heathlands, through a permitting process under the Environment Order (NI) 2002. Furthermore, advice and Environment Fund support is enabling conservation work in uplands. The Department's Management of Sensitive Sites (MOSS) Scheme also delivers management to improve the condition of a range of habitats and species within ASSIs, including recent work on heathland habitats.

A significant area of heathland was impacted by the recent fire in the Mourne. My officials have instigated an assessment of the environmental damage caused to the protected habitats of the Mourne. This will provide recommendations on restoration.

NIEA Natural Environment Division (NED) provides grant aid through the Environment Fund (EF) for not-for-profit organisations to work in partnership to support and undertake habitat management including heathland management. This has included funding to Mourne Heritage Trust and recently to the Woodland Trust to acquire substantial land holdings at Cave Hill, Co. Antrim, and subsequently manage them for the benefit of nature conservation.

An EF Environmental Challenge Fund is currently open for applications and includes opportunities for funding of priority habitats including heathland projects.

In addition, the Environmental Impact Assessment (Agriculture) Regulations protect heathlands by requiring farmers and landowners to apply to my Department for permission, above certain thresholds, before altering the use or management of areas of uncultivated or semi-natural land.

Furthermore, my Department's Cross-Compliance rules also aim to ensure protection of heathlands through a range of measures, including the prevention of over-grazing, poaching and soil erosion.

Looking forward, my officials are working with farmers and land managers, agricultural industry representatives and environmental stakeholders to co-design a future agri-environment scheme. The scheme will help farmers to deliver a range of environmental outcomes, including improvements in water and air quality, biodiversity in a range of habitats, including heathlands, and reductions in carbon emissions.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the steps taken, and planned, to restore grasslands in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18444/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department has a range of measures in place to protect and restore grasslands in Northern Ireland.

The Environmental Farming Scheme offers support to farmers and land managers to maintain and enhance the environmental quality of certain grassland types through appropriate management regimes. Previous agri-environment schemes also offered similar support, including management of Species-rich, Semi-natural and Semi-improved grassland types.

In addition to support for the maintenance and restoration of certain grassland types through EFS, my Department also works closely with key stakeholders on the implementation of an INTERREG Va project for managing sensitive grassland habitats at Cuilcagh Mountain SAC. My Department is planning to support further restoration activities through the development of the PEACE+ programme, which aims to build on this work and expand through Nature Recovery Networks.

My Department is also developing a series of Conservation Management Plans which aim to identify the habitat types across the majority of the Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) within Northern Ireland. After assessing pressure and threats and

close engagement with key stakeholders, these plans will outline the necessary conservation measures for maintenance and restoration of habitat types, including grasslands.

NIEA Natural Environment Division (NED) provides grant aid through the Environment Fund (EF) for not-for-profit organisations to work in partnership to support and undertake habitat management including grasslands. An EF Environmental Challenge Fund is currently open for applications and includes opportunities for funding of priority habitats including grassland projects.

In addition, the Environmental Impact Assessment (Agriculture) Regulations protect grasslands by requiring farmers and landowners to apply to my Department for permission, above certain thresholds, before altering the use or management of areas of uncultivated or semi-natural land, including grasslands.

My Department's Cross-Compliance rules also aim to ensure protection of grassland through a range of measures, including the prevention of over-grazing, poaching and soil erosion. Furthermore, I have retained a ban on ploughing or conversion of Environmentally Sensitive Permanent Grassland under Basic Payment Scheme rules.

Looking forward, my officials are working with farmers and land managers, agricultural industry representatives and environmental stakeholders to co-design a future agri-environment scheme. The scheme will help farmers to deliver a range of environmental outcomes, including improvements in water and air quality, biodiversity in a range of habitats, including grasslands, and reductions in carbon emissions.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to detail the number of (a) vets; (b) environmental health officers; and (c) other ancillary staff required for each border control site at each port in Northern Ireland at present; and (ii) the projected number required.

**(AQW 18469/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department is responsible for the majority of checks at the portal inspection facilities however checks on High Risk Food Not of Animal Origin and Fish Product are carried out by the following District Councils who also contributed to this response – Mid and East Antrim Council (Larne Port), Belfast Council Port Health Authority (Belfast Council) and Newry and Mourne District Council (Warrenpoint Port).

The numbers of staff currently required at each portal inspection facility is outlined in the table Annex A below. Resourcing levels do not meet DAERA's requirement as 43 posts are not presently filled. This deficit is particularly marked for vets as only 14 of 29 posts are filled.

The number of staff required per port for full build permanent facilities will be captured as part of the development of a Full Business Case, work on which is underway. As the proposals for infrastructure will be significant, cross-cutting and controversial, following development of the Full Business case I intend to take options for consideration and decision to the Northern Ireland Executive before commencing building work on the permanent facilities. Annex B provides the very approximate figures currently being considered for planning purposes. These figures will be kept under continual review and adapted in response to any changes in political agreements. Both recruitment and permanent infrastructure development are currently on hold whilst an alternative is negotiated to replace the Northern Ireland Protocol which is disrupting trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and unnecessarily compromising Northern Ireland traders.

To support the Full Business Case, DAERA is currently conducting a workforce planning exercise to model future resource estimates. The residual uncertainties in this model concern the additional burdens that will result from the end of the current retail grace periods. Much will depend on the supply chains and distribution models used by retailers in future. For example, goods that are currently supplied from Great Britain may be sourced elsewhere and consignments may be consolidated thus reducing certification demand and the clearance procedures necessary as goods pass into Northern Ireland.

Belfast City Council has commented that due to the scale and complexity of the work, they have established an implementation programme team on a short-term basis, to plan and further develop the service during this initial period. In addition to the figures in Annex A, this team includes several other staff, including a Senior Environmental Health Officer (EHO) and a City Protection Manager EHO, as well as programme management support. This is in addition to a small pre-existing team of Port Health EHOs based at the Port Health inspection facility, comprising of 3 other EHOs not included in Annex A.

With regard to future requirements Belfast City Council states that it is working to plan for what level of service provision will be required once retail grace periods have been removed, at which point they will deliver the full level of checks. It has commented that, "there are challenges in quantifying the scale of the increase in staff numbers required, given the continuing uncertainty in the volume of checks that will eventually be needed". As negotiations at United Kingdom (UK) / European Union level are continuing, a clear timeline for 'phasing in' additional checks once the grace period for retailers expires in October 2021, has not yet been confirmed. The Council may need to increase the staff complement significantly within the current financial year. However in the absence of an agreed timeline being confirmed by UK Government it is not possible to assess what level of increase will actually be required, the timing of when we will need to recruit, and as a result what the additional cost of this will be in this financial year. Office accommodation for any increase in staff numbers is not available in the current temporary facilities. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has also advised that any increase in staffing requirements during this financial year, will require an in-year bid to Government spending monitoring rounds.

FSA and DAERA continue to progress work to gather better volumetric data that could inform workforce planning. Until this work is concluded, we can provide only indicative projections and estimated costs based on FSA and DAERA modelling



undertaken in 2020. This data analysis produced estimates based on previous trade flows, which will likely change and adapt, and may be an unreliable indicator of future trade flows. Belfast City Council officials have raised issues with this analysis with FSA and DAERA separately. The modelling deficiencies we are aware of include:

- Gaps within the data used as an input;
- Assumptions used for the time to complete tasks; and
- Analysis of physical space requirements and staff accommodation.

The current FSA model indicates that there would need to be a significant increase in the 'on shift' teams and an associated increase in oversight roles."

The total estimates are included below in Annex B below:

#### Annex A

##### Current resource requirement for portal inspection facilities

	Vets including managers (DAERA)	Environmental Health Officers including managers (District Council)	Other ancillary staff (DAERA)	Other ancillary staff (District Council)
Belfast	17	21	47	8
Larne	12	13	67	0
Warrenpoint	0	3.5 (plus 5 on rotational support)	10	0
Foyle port and airports	0	-	11	-
Headquarters - administration	0	-	6	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>38 (approx.)</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>8</b>

#### Annex B

##### Projected resource requirement for portal inspection facilities

	Vets including managers (DAERA)	Environmental Health Officers including managers (District Council)	Other ancillary staff (DAERA)	Other ancillary staff (District Council)
Belfast	34	76	79	32
Larne	33	73	91	0
Warrenpoint	1	3.5 (plus 5 on rotational support)	19	0
Foyle port and airports	0	-	12	-
Headquarters - administration	1	-	21	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>153 (approx.)</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>32</b>

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs who is legally responsible for the staff and the associated costs at border control sites in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18471/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Under the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement, the Northern Ireland Protocol and domestic law, Northern Ireland must continue to adhere to the European Union (EU) Official Controls Regulation (OCR). 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), now including Great Britain (GB), to ensure compliance with EU law.

My Department, as a Competent Authority, has a statutory responsibility to ensure compliance with those elements of EU law relating to the areas of animal and plant health, animal welfare, and aspects of public health. As such, my Department must maintain adequate staffing to deliver the work required. DAERA authorises its own officers to deliver official controls at NI Points of Entry (POEs) on what the EU considers third country imports of live animals, including live fish; products of

animal origin (POAO); animal by-products; regulated plants, plant products and other objects (such as agricultural or forestry machinery); and seeds.

Local Authorities have been designated as the relevant Competent Authority for a series of official controls at NI POEs, under the provisions of the Official Feed and Food Control Regulations (NI) 2009 (as amended), the Trade in Animals and Related Products Regulations (NI) 2011 (as amended), and the Sea Fishing (Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing) Order (NI) 2018.

As such, relevant Local Authorities also have a responsibility to maintain adequate staffing to deliver the work required and authorise their own officers to perform checks relating to high-risk food not of animal origin, fishery products (including checks on Illegal Unreported Unregulated Catch Certificates), and organics and plastic kitchenware originating in or consigned from China and Hong Kong.

Pursuant to OCR, EU member states (and NI by extension of the NI Protocol) must also ensure that adequate financial resources are available to perform official controls and other official activities, such as checks at POEs. As such, each Competent Authority is responsible for ensuring funding is in place for checks that they are legally required to deliver.

I am firmly opposed to the detrimental impact of these additional new checks and the barriers they place on the intra-UK movement of live animals, goods and products, from GB to NI.

For this reason, I have already written to Defra Secretary of State, George Eustice MP, and the European Commission, to highlight the difficulties caused by these new requirements and the practical implementation of the NI Protocol. Moreover, discussions between the United Kingdom (UK) Government and the European Commission are continuing, which I hope will find pragmatic solutions and resolutions to the current difficulties caused by implementation of these checks.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of (i) whether the introduction of the Small Hive Beetle to Northern Ireland would decimate the population of honey bees and all other pollinating insects; and (ii) the impact on fruit growers in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18473/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The Small hive beetle (SHB) is a major threat to the long-term sustainability and economic prosperity of beekeeping in Northern Ireland and, as a consequence, to agriculture (including fruit growers) and the environment through disruption to pollination services.

Small Hive Beetle (SHB) is indigenous to Africa, where it is considered a minor scavenger pest of honey bee colonies, causing comparatively little harm. However, outside its native range within colonies which lack African bees' defences, adult beetles enter hives unchecked causing devastating infestations. The beetle can multiply to huge numbers within infested colonies, where it eats brood, honey and pollen, destroys combs and causes fermentation and spoiling of honey. If beetle infestations are uncontrolled they ultimately destroy the colony.

Small hive beetle is pest of social bees that live in colonies. It will infest honeybee colonies and there is evidence from North America that bumblebee colonies can also be attacked. Solitary bees, which make up the bulk of native bee species, are not likely to be affected. Other pollinating insects, e.g. flies, wasps, beetles, moths and butterflies, are not affected by small hive beetle.

The main fruit industry in NI affected by a potential decline in honeybee populations is Bramley apple production. Insect pollination is essential to proper fruit set. For example, pollination services underpinned ~65% of market output of Cox and Gala varieties[1]. In England, the economic impact of insect pollination on orchard profits was £14,500 per hectare for Bramley[2]. The extent to which apple crops rely on honeybee pollination is variable and depends on the apple variety and also the availability of other pollinators, such as solitary bees, bumblebees and hoverflies. In England, solitary bees were the most important pollinators of Bramley apples, with honeybees contributing 26% ( $\pm 30\%$ ) of pollination services[2].

We are reliant on the controls put in place by the European Union to prevent the spread of SHB from the affected province of Calabria in southern Italy. These have been effective in preventing the further spread of the pest. However if SHB was to be introduced and was not detected very soon after its arrival, it would spread rapidly into the surrounding honey bee population, making eradication very difficult. The range of chemical or biological controls available may be limited. Some of those used in other parts of the world are not licensed for use within the UK. Control methods used overseas so far have not been completely successful in eliminating SHB, merely controlling it to below damaging population levels.

If the Small hive beetle were ever to become established in Northern Ireland, then beekeepers here would have to learn to control it along the same lines as beekeepers in countries where the beetle is already present – focusing on prevention of infestation, detection and control.

- 1 Garratt MP, Breeze TD, Jenner N, Polce C, Biesmeijer JC, Potts SG. Avoiding a bad apple: Insect pollination enhances fruit quality and economic value. *Agric Ecosyst Environ.* 2014;184 100:34-40; doi:10.1016/j.agee.2013.10.032.
- 2 Garratt MP, Breeze TD, Boreux V, Fountain MT, Mc Kerchar M, Webber SM, et al. Apple pollination: Demand depends on variety and supply depends on pollinator identity. *PLoS One.* 2016;11 5:e0153889; doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0153889.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to detail the costs incurred to date for legal advice sought by his Department for the purposes of lodging judicial proceedings against the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol; and (ii) whether this issue has been discussed at the Executive due to its cross-cutting nature.

**(AQW 18476/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** To date there have been no costs incurred by my Department for the purposes of lodging judicial proceedings against the Northern Ireland Protocol and the matter has not been considered by the Executive.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the stop-start nature of the ports infrastructure build, whether further costs have been incurred in addition to the £50.4 million already allocated.

**(AQW 18507/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** On 2 April 2021 an instruction was issued to the appointed contract teams to move to a controlled stop for an initial period of six weeks which was extended for a further three weeks on 6 May 2021. The controlled stop was initiated to allow officials to complete work associated with workforce planning, finalising the client brief and achieving the necessary approvals associated with spends in this financial year. The controlled stop triggered a compensation event however DAERA has not received any compensation claim to date.

Full costs associated with the stop and any delay will be clear following further scoping work and discussions with contractors. Further clarity will also be provided when compensation claims are received and any adjudication process completed.

Any additional costs incurred in relation to these works will be captured in the development of the Full Business Case.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the destruction of protected wildlife will not be involved in his Department's Bovine Tuberculosis Strategy.

**(AQW 18508/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The proposed bTB (bovine Tuberculosis) Eradication Strategy for Northern Ireland aims to reduce, and eventually eradicate, bTB levels by comprehensively addressing all the recognised key factors in the spread of the disease.

Within the development of the Strategy, consideration has been given to the role of wildlife, specifically badgers, as it is widely accepted that badgers act as reservoirs of bTB infection. The Department is of the view that there needs to be some form of badger intervention if bTB spread between badgers and cattle is to be effectively addressed.

The eradication of bTB from Northern Ireland remains one of my top priorities and I have stated that I wish to consult on the new bTB Eradication Strategy, including proposals for wildlife intervention, in the very near future.

Following consideration of the responses to that consultation, it is my intention to progress implementation of the new Strategy, so that we can move towards eradication of this devastating disease from Northern Ireland.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he intends to introduce a similar scheme to the UK Government's proposed Environmental Land Management scheme.

**(AQW 18511/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Work is underway to develop an agricultural support framework portfolio better suited to local needs and one that will provide for and secure long term sustainability within the industry.

My officials are working with farmers and land managers, agricultural industry representatives and environmental stakeholders to co-design schemes which will deliver a range of environmental outcomes, including improvements in water and air quality, biodiversity and reductions in carbon emissions.

My officials have been watching closely the development of the Environmental Land Management Scheme in England as well as those schemes being developed in Scotland and Wales and the revised Common Agricultural Policy in the Republic of Ireland. This will help inform the development of future schemes in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) when he expects the Farm Families Health Checks Programme to recommence; and (ii) to outline their work.

**(AQW 18542/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:**

- (i) The Farm Family Health Checks Programme re-commenced at Omagh Mart on 10 May.
- (ii) The Farm Family Health Checks Programme increases access to health screening services. A qualified nurses can detect ill health and offer healthy lifestyle advice on a range of issues including prevention or early detection of heart disease, obesity, cancer, diabetes and mental health problems. With the clients consent a report is sent to their GP for consideration and for those clients for whom it was recommended to see their GP, a 3 month follow up phone call is provided to reinforce health messages.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the number of pollution incidents in watercourses recorded by his Department; and (ii) any corresponding fines or prosecutions, broken down by location, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18544/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:**

- (i) The number of water pollution incidents confirmed 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.

The total number of confirmed water pollution incidents in 2018, 2019 and 2020 were 924, 941 and 948 respectively. A small number of confirmed water pollution incidents, approximately 1.5%, each year are confirmed but with their locations below the high water mark along the Northern Ireland coastline outside of the Parliamentary Boundary and these are, as a result, not presented in the table below. In 2018, there were 19 such incidents, in 2019 there were 14 and in 2020 there were 9.

**Table 1: Water Pollution Incidents by Constituency 2018 to 2020**

Constituency	2018	2019	2020
North Down	31	21	20
Upper Bann	60	48	47
East Antrim	20	20	20
North Antrim	70	65	71
South Down	68	54	61
Mid Ulster	33	56	73
Newry and Armagh	100	108	103
West Tyrone	119	138	91
Belfast East	15	22	10
Belfast South	9	9	11
Strangford	28	22	42
Belfast West	13	8	11
Lagan Valley	45	43	44
South Antrim	55	53	57
Belfast North	9	3	7
East Londonderry	51	77	125
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	155	157	123
Foyle	24	23	23

- (ii) Table two below collates the corresponding prosecution proceedings commenced by the Department in the last three years by constituency. Where a case has been concluded in court and sentence passed, this is reflected. Where a case has not yet been concluded, these are marked 'Ongoing'. Given the sensitivity of cases not yet proven in court, I am unable to refer further to these investigations.

**Table 2: Prosecution Cases (Completed and Ongoing) for Water Pollution by Constituency 2018 to 2020**

Constituency	Cases	2018	2019	2020
North Down	1	1 Fine £1,000	0	0
Upper Bann	3	1 Fine £500 1 Fine £2,500	1 Ongoing	0
East Antrim	0	0	0	0

Constituency	Cases	2018	2019	2020
North Antrim	6	1 Fine £500 1 Fine £3,000 1 (3 month custodial sentence suspended of 2 years)	1 Fine £1,000 1 Ongoing	1 Ongoing
South Down	1	0	1 Fine £1,000	0
Mid Ulster	7	0	5 Ongoing	2 Ongoing
Newry & Armagh	4	2 Ongoing	1 Ongoing	1 Ongoing
West Tyrone	6	1 Outcome not known	1 Fine £1,000	4 Ongoing
Belfast East	0	0	0	0
Belfast South	0	0	0	0
Strangford	1	0	1 Ongoing	0
Belfast West	1	1 Fine £500	0	0
Lagan Valley	1	0	1 Fine £750	0
South Antrim	7	1 Ongoing 1 Fine £500 1 Caution	1 Fine £750 1 Fine £7,500	2 Ongoing
Belfast North	0	0	0	0
East Londonderry	16	1 Fine £1,250 1 Ongoing	6 Ongoing	8 Ongoing
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	3	1 Fine £1,000 1 Fine £4,500 1 Ongoing	0	0
Foyle	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>18</b>

A recommendation to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) in relation to water pollution is reserved for the most serious of cases or as a last resort. The numbers of cases are small compared to the overall number of initial reports made to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, but each incident requiring enforcement action is assessed in line with Departmental policy and procedures and may be dealt with in a manner other than a recommendation for prosecution.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many requests his Department received for the translation of documents into (i) Irish; and (ii) Ulster Scots, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18567/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** From the information which is currently available, the number of requests received by the Department for translation of documents into (i) Irish; and (ii) Ulster Scots in each of the last three years beginning on 01 April 2018 and ending on 31 March 2021 is as follows:

(i) Irish

2018 – 2019: Nil

2019 – 2020: Nil

2020 – 2021: Nil

(ii) Ulster Scots

2018 – 2019: Nil

2019 – 2020: Nil

2020 – 2021: Nil

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail on the engagement his Department has had with the Ulster Farmer's Union and other industry representatives regarding his Department's Climate Change Bill.  
**(AQW 18580/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department completed a public consultation on a 'Discussion Document on a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill' and this consultation was issued widely, including to the Ulster Farmer's Union and other industry representatives in Northern Ireland. It sought views from the general public and a wide range of stakeholders and sectors across Northern Ireland on policy options for a climate change Bill for Northern Ireland. Analysis of the consultation responses has been commissioned from Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA). The results of the analysis and summary of responses obtained from the consultation, will be published by my Department in due course.

**Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the trees directly surrounding Portavoe Reservoir are under the stewardship of the Forest Service.  
**(AQW 18589/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Forest Service currently manage the trees directly surrounding Portavoe Reservoir.

Following the sale of the land by NI Water to private landowners, the ownership and management of the trees continues as per the agreement with the former landowner NI Water, which is covenanted in the Contracts for Sale relating to the land transfer.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department is aware of any issues surrounding the weir in Sion Mills and the impact it is having on migratory fish.  
**(AQW 18829/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department is aware of the concerns regarding fish passage at the weir at Sion Mills which falls within the Lough's Agency jurisdiction.

Both DAERA and Loughs Agency officials have visited the weir to review fish passage. Lough's Agency officials have confirmed that they will be requesting an annual 6 week shutdown of the hydro-electric turbines to ensure the safe downstream passage of smolts. The site will continue to be monitored to ensure any fish passage issues are resolved as soon as possible.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the action his Department is taking to enable the free movement of people who use assistance dogs from 1 July 2021.  
**(AQW 18856/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** As a result of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Northern Ireland 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, including assistance and working dogs, between or into European Union Member States, continues to apply in Northern Ireland (NI), following the end of the transition phase.

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, hobby breeders, and the potential impact on tourism for those wishing to holiday in NI or return to NI from Great Britain (GB) accompanied by their pets.

I have therefore 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. The Commission has responded and technical discussions are ongoing. In the interim, I will continue engagement with Ministerial colleagues to urgently seek derogations where possible from these unnecessary additional requirements.

I have also confirmed, after exploring potential flexibilities, and considering pet owners have not had time to familiarise themselves with the new rules, that DAERA would delay the introduction of any checks on compliance with the EU rules on pet travel from GB to NI until 1 July 2021. As a result, there will be no routine checks on travellers' compliance, until then.

My Department is currently considering the next steps with regards this issue. The present position is set out in the Department's Compliance protocol, available <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/compliance-protocol-sanitary-phytosanitary-controls-and-point-entry-marketing-standards-checks-gb-ni>

It is my hope, however, that from the discussions and processes outlined above, sensible and pragmatic solutions can be found before then.

Any progress made or flexibilities agreed in respect of the additional requirements, along with any changes to the current enforcement approach will be published on the DAERA website <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/travelling-pets>, on the DAERA Frequently Asked Questions document

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/qas-pet-travel-1-january-2021> and communicated widely through our usual Departmental media channels.

## Department for Communities

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Communities 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 17210/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):** Funding awarded by public funders should be uploaded to the Government Funding Database, which is publicly accessible at <https://govfundingpublic.nics.gov.uk>.

Table 1 provides details of funding recorded on the database as having been allocated to groups in the South Down constituency by the Department for Communities in the last three years via a range of commissioning methods and approaches. These include existing funding frameworks, match funding to local government community development programmes and a number of regional partnerships.

Extensive financial support was provided by my Department to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 in the last year. While publicly available funding schemes have ended, delivery partners are currently finalising closure arrangements. Where this information is available, I have provided details of successful grant awardees at Table 2. My Department has also distributed funding directly to Councils. Some of this funding may have been allocated in the South Down constituency and each Council would be able to provide details.

Through the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund administered in South Down, there is no direct funding to voluntary and charitable groups in this constituency. However, at Table 3 I have provided details of funding to Council and Statutory Bodies which have benefited residents in the Downpatrick Neighbourhood Renewal Area.

**Table 1**

Year	Programme	Funding
2018/19	Arts Council NI Annual Funding Programme	£33,450.00
2018/19	Arts Council NI DFC Additional Resources	£15,200.00
2018/19	Arts Council NI Musical Instruments Programme	£24,066.00
2018/19	Small Grants Programme	£74,121.67
2018/19	Grúpaí le Gaeilge	£325.00
2018/19	Scéim na bhFéilte	£2,240.00
2018/19	Scéim na gCampaí Samhraidh	£7,000.00
2018/19	Scéim na nImeachtaí Óige	£9,800.00
2018/19	Scéim Pobal Gaeilge 2016 - 2020	£66,023.25
2018/19	Small Grants for Volunteering 2018/2019	£12,598.00
2018/19	Community Cohesion	£16,411.41
2018/19	Community Safety 2018/19	£5,000.00
2018/19	Supporting People Funding 2018/19	£1,231,834.00
2018/19	NI Museum Council Acquisition Fund	£850.00
2018/19	AEDs / Defibrillators for Sport	£700.00
2018/19	Sport NI Business Case Investment - Capital	£126,002.00
2018/19	Sport NI Business Case Investment in Outdoor Recreation	£5,000.00
2018/19	Pitch Maintenance Phase 2	£98,441.60
2018/19	Ulster Scots Agency Financial Assistance Scheme	£83,148.15
2019/20	Arts Council NI Annual Funding Programme	£33,450.00
2019/20	Arts Council NI Musical Instruments Programme	£84,774.00

Year	Programme	Funding
2019/20	Rural Needs Programme	£7,900.00
2019/20	Creative Industries Innovation Fund	£9,940.00
2019/20	Access and Inclusion Programme 2019/20	£21,000.00
2019/20	Small Capital Grants Programme	£57,531.76
2019/20	Colmcille 2018	£820.00
2019/20	Scéim na bhFéilte 2019	£1,925.00
2019/20	Scéim na gCampaí Samhraidh 2019	£7,000.00
2019/20	Scéim na nImeachtaí Óige	£3,250.00
2019/20	Scéim Pobal Gaeilge 2016 - 2020	£66,023.25
2019/20	Historic Environment Fund Repair Stream 2019/20	£11,495.00
2019/20	Historic Environment Fund Regeneration Stream 2019/20	£5,930.00
2019/20	Small Grants for Volunteering 2019/2020	£18,156.00
2019/20	2019/2020 Community Cohesion	£6,653.52
2019/20	Community Safety 2019/20	£9,820.00
2019/20	Supporting People Funding 2019/20	£1,231,834.00
2019/20	Sport NI Business Case Investment - Capital	£86,954.00
2019/20	Ulster Scots Agency Financial Assistance Scheme	£94,230.28
2020/21	Health Safety Capital Programme 2020/21	£49,144.00
2020/21	Arts Council NI Musical Instruments Programme	£12,190.00
2020/21	Arts Council NI Musical Instruments PNPG Programme	£6,562.00
2020/21	Organisations Emergency Programme	£67,505.00
2020/21	Small Capital Programme	£6,455.00
2020/21	Stability and Renewal Programme for Organisations	£68,411.00
2020/21	Small Capital Grants Programme	£94,773.22
2020/21	Scéim na nImeachtaí Óige	£1,750.00
2020/21	Scéim Pobal Gaeilge 2016 - 2020	£33,011.62
2020/21	2020-2021 Community Grants Programme	£7,475.68
2020-21	Communities Covid Response 2020/21	£4,448.13
2020-21	Community Safety	£5,000.00
2020-21	NI Museum Council Accredited Museum Grant Programme	£28,700.00
2020-21	Sports Hardship Fund	£145,000.00
2020-21	Ulster Scots Agency Financial Assistance Scheme	£87,427.65

**Table 2: 2020-2021 Covid-19 Funding Support**

- Covid-19 Charities Fund (Phase I);  
<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/covid-19-charities-fund#section-4>
- Covid-19 Charities Fund (Phase II) not yet published but should be available shortly at:  
<https://communityfinanceireland.com/minister-deirdre-hargey-announces-release-of-7-5-million-to-support-ni-based-charities/>
- Social Enterprise Fund  
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/covid-social-enterprise-fund>
- Sports Sustainability Fund  
<http://www.sportni.net/funding/our-funding-programmes/sports-sustainability-fund/sports-sustainability-fund-awards-list/>



- Heritage Recovery Fund

<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/news/northern-ireland-heritage-road-recovery-thanks-ps528million-funding>

- Covid-19 Culture, Languages, Arts & Heritage Programme

COVID-19 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Support Programme 2020-2021 (<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-covid-19-culture-languages-art-heritage-support-2020-21.pdf>)

The web link provides details of funding which has been distributed through a number of delivery partners. This will be updated shortly to provide details of grant recipients.

- Community, Voluntary and Social Enterprise Sector COVID Recovery Fund - PPE.

Organisation Name	Total Awarded	Total Paid	Council Area
All Lives Are Precious	1887.63	1887.63	Newry, Mourne and Down
All lives are Precious	2704.39	2704.39	Newry, Mourne and Down
An Ríocht Camogie Club	2942.56	2942.56	Newry, Mourne and Down
ANNALONG FOOTBALL CLUB	2620.06	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Ballyhornan & District Community Association	1560.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Ballykinlar Cross Community Preschool	2499.55	2499.55	Newry, Mourne and Down
Ballynahinch Rugby Football Club	2000.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Ballynahinch Rugby Football Club	2921.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Ballyvea Football Club Ltd.	2254.00	2212.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
BANBRIDGE AMATEUR BOXING CLUB	5600.00	5600.00	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon
Benagh Rural Development Association Ltd	1797.00	1797.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Blue Row Residents Association	3963.01	3963.01	Newry, Mourne and Down
Burren Community Forum	2064.96	2064.96	Newry, Mourne and Down
carnagat area community association	4000.00	4000.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Centre Ministries	4921.80	4921.80	Newry, Mourne and Down
Club Down	4881.60	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann Craobh Boirche	2117.29	2117.29	Newry, Mourne and Down
County Down Rural Community Network	4734.80	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Donaghmore development association LTD	1800.00	1800.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Down Academy Pipes and Drums	2430.34	2178.98	Newry, Mourne and Down
Down Gaelic Athletic Association	1000.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Downpatrick Credit Union	2658.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Drumaness Cross Community Playgroup	3200.00	3199.30	Newry, Mourne and Down
Drumaness Cross Community Playgroup	1450.00	1375.07	Newry, Mourne and Down
Drumaroad Residents Group	2500.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Dundrum Cross Community Playgroup	3943.02	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Dunnaman Children's Centre	2970.86	2971.52	Newry, Mourne and Down

Organisation Name	Total Awarded	Total Paid	Council Area
First Rathfriland Presbyterian Church	1590.00	0.00	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon
Glassdrumman Hibernian Social Club	975.96	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
HARMONY COMMUNITY TRUST	1532.00	1532.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Home Start Newry & Mourne	2316.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Kazoku karate	2000.00	2000.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Kids Kabin Preschool Drumaroad	2000.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Kilkeel Charitable Trust	1750.94	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Kilkeel Credit Union Limited	2704.13	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
KILKEEL GOLF CLUB	1125.00	1123.20	Newry, Mourne and Down
Kilkeel Sea Cadets	2206.41	2206.41	Newry, Mourne and Down
Kingdom Men's Shed	2455.30	2455.30	Newry, Mourne and Down
Kingdom Youth Club	3709.80	3709.80	Newry, Mourne and Down
Kingdom Youth Club	3000.00	2999.90	Newry, Mourne and Down
Ladies Of Mourne	2405.83	2405.83	Newry, Mourne and Down
Lecale Orange Development Association	1008.97	1008.97	Newry, Mourne and Down
Let's Do Veterans Rehabilitation and Support Services Limited	3000.00	3000.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
LIFE CHANGE CHANGES LIVES	1600.00	1600.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Mainstay DRP	3000.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Moneydarragh Community Hub	3138.94	3138.94	Newry, Mourne and Down
Moneyslane rural community hub	3187.99	3187.99	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon
Naíscoil Bheanna Boirche Caisleán Nua	1828.29	1828.29	Newry, Mourne and Down
Newcastle Community Cinema	2547.60	2547.60	Newry, Mourne and Down
Newcastle Football Club	3014.77	3014.77	Newry, Mourne and Down
Parents of Sacred Heart Primary School	2299.29	2299.29	Newry, Mourne and Down
Rathfriland & District Regeneration Co. Ltd	228.00	228.00	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon
Rathfriland Football Youth Club	1549.00	1549.00	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon
Road Safe NI	1875.00	1875.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Royal British Legion Rathfriland Branch	1094.79	1094.79	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon
Sheepbridge heritage and cultural society	6980.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Slieve Gullion Credit Union Limited	1643.66	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
ST Colmans Drumanness GAC	3900.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
St Colmans GAC Drumanness	3050.00	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
St Johns GAC Drumnaquoile	3000.00	3000.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
St John's GAC Drumnaquoile	5000.00	5000.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
The Happiness Cafes	3883.56	3883.56	Newry, Mourne and Down

Organisation Name	Total Awarded	Total Paid	Council Area
Valley Rangers Football Club	1827.61	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Warrenpoint Orange resource and interpretive centre	1950.00	1950.00	Newry, Mourne and Down
Yellow Road Farm CIC	3603.80	0.00	Newry, Mourne and Down

**Table 3**

Grant Recipient	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
NM&DDC NR Downpatrick Technical Assistance	£15,801.65	£16,290.00	£16,440.00
SEH&SCT Downpatrick Family Health & Wellbeing Project	£51,197.71	£54,819.24	£63,600.60
SEH&SCT Downpatrick Speech & Language Project	£48,112.00	£48,112.00	£48,112.00
SERC Downpatrick Driving to Success Project	£63,468.18	£59,733.78	£63,014.39
Downpatrick PHA Health & Community Engagement Project	£25,000.00	£25,000.00	£25,000.00
NM&DDC Meadowlands Play Park Capital investment	£224,562.83		
NM&DDC Meadowlands Play Park Enhancement Capital investment		£21,146.00	

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities how many people are on the housing waiting list for a bungalow.  
(AQW 17633/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive has confirmed that it does not hold data for people on the housing waiting list specifically for a bungalow. Instead it has provided the following table which details the number of applicants as at 31 March 2021 on the waiting list for ground floor accommodation. This includes applicants who require ground floor accommodation as well as those applicants who have expressed a preference for ground floor accommodation. In addition, the table includes information in respect of applicants who require wheelchair accessible accommodation.

	Total
Applicants who Require Ground Floor Accommodation	8,072
Applicants who are Wheelchair Users	581

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities what action she is taking to address social housing need in East Belfast.  
(AQW 17726/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive has advised me that at the end of March 2021 there were 2,572 applicants on the waiting list in the Belfast East Parliamentary Constituency, of which 1,667 were in housing stress. The annual allocations to applicants was 451 homes.

Please note that this includes the following Common Landlord Areas which fall across the boundary with the Belfast South Constituency, Cregagh Castlereagh, Willowfield/Upper Castlereagh Road and Bridge End / Rotherdam Court.

I am committed to ensuring more social homes are built and allocated where they are needed. Additional actions to achieve this aim are currently being developed and the Housing Executive has been asked to identify these mechanisms. Ring fencing of the social housing budget will be reintroduced to ensure that those areas of acute housing need are prioritised.

There are currently 117 new social housing units under construction. I have already provided you with details of social housing units programmed to start as part of the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) 2020/21 – 2022/23, within the Belfast East Constituency in my response to AQW 17578 /17-22.

Please note that I have just approved the SHDP 2021/22 – 2023/24. The published SHDP will be updated to reflect additional and re-profiled schemes within the Belfast East Constituency.

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister for Communities what action she is taking to ensure to Irish passport holders can secure National Insurance numbers in the absence of holding additional documentation.  
(AQW 17824/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** In order for a National Insurance Number to be allocated an individual's identity needs to be verified through the provision of documentation which needs to be authenticated by the Department.

My department is now contacting people to arrange an interview where a face to face appointment is required to complete the application process.

Once the documentation is validated a National Insurance this Number is issued to the person within days.

**Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on restoring face to face National Insurance Number interviews. (AQW 17851/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** In order for a National Insurance Number to be allocated an individual's identity needs to be verified through the provision of documentation which needs to be authenticated by the Department.

My department is now contacting people to arrange an interview where a face to face appointment is required to complete the application process.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Communities (i) to detail the number of people in receipt of Income Support on (a) 31 March 2020; and (b) 31 March 2021; (ii) whether those in receipt of Carer's Allowance received an uplift in payments during the COVID-19 pandemic; and (iii) to outline the rationale for this decision. (AQW 17933/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The number of people in receipt of Income Support on 29 March 2020, (the closest date to 31 March for which there is data available) was 22,950. The statistics for 31 March 2021 have not yet been published

In relation to points (ii) and (iii), I refer the member to response to AQW 17934.

During the pandemic the rate of Carer's Allowance was increased in line with the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) – that is 1.7% from April 2020 and 0.5% from April 2021. In terms of the weekly rate payable under Carer's Allowance here, when the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions makes an Up-rating Order in Britain, my Department is empowered only to make a corresponding Order. My Department has no power to increase the amounts of benefit by a different or greater amount in the annual Up-rating Order.

I recognise the importance of the role of unpaid carers, especially in recent times when other support services may have been reduced or even closed and the caring role became even harder due to the need to self-isolate or shield the person they care for.

In terms of providing longer term additional financial support for carers here, it is anticipated that this will be considered as part of the upcoming welfare mitigations review.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Communities (i) to detail the number of people in receipt of Carer's Allowance on (a) 31 March 2020; and (b) 31 March 2021; (ii) whether those in receipt of Carer's Allowance received an uplift in payments during the COVID-19 Pandemic; and (iii) to outline the rationale for this decision. (AQW 17934/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The number of people in receipt of Carer's Allowance in March 2020 was 48,730. As the statistics for 31 March 2021 have not yet been published.

During the pandemic the rate of Carer's Allowance was increased in line with the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) – that is 1.7% from April 2020 and 0.5% from April 2021. In terms of the weekly rate payable under Carer's Allowance here, when the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions makes an Up-rating Order in Britain, my Department is empowered only to make a corresponding Order. My Department has no power to increase the amounts of benefit by a different or greater amount in the annual Up-rating Order.

I recognise the importance of the role of unpaid carers, especially in recent times when other support services may have been reduced or even closed and the caring role became even harder due to the need to self-isolate or shield the person they care for.

In terms of providing longer term additional financial support for carers here, it is anticipated that this will be considered as part of the upcoming welfare mitigations review.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities what vocational qualifications trainees on the Job Start scheme will attain. (AQW 17955/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The purpose of the JobStart Scheme is to provide opportunities for young people, at risk of long term unemployment, to develop skills to help them become more employable. Employers can do this through:

- training to develop occupational related skills (specific to the job)
- training to develop employability skills (transferable skills)
- support to update their CV and interview preparation
- support to look for long-term work

While employers will determine the training and/or qualifications a young person may obtain whilst taking part in their JobStart opportunity, they will still be required to provide the Department with a detailed training plan for each job opportunity created within two weeks of the young person commencing their opportunity.

This will set out the skills development plans and inform the Department of any qualifications to be undertaken.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the number of places available in the Job Start scheme; (ii) the number of employers required to meet the targeted number of places; and (c) the number of trainees who, on completion of training, are expected to secure full-time employment.

**(AQW 17956/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The JobStart Scheme hopes to offer over 3,300 job opportunities.

As the scheme is demand led by employers who wish to apply for funding for JobStart opportunities there is no clear way to estimate how many employers will apply. Based on current applications received, over 1,200 employers would need to apply to reach the target of 3,300 job opportunities.

The purpose of the JobStart Scheme is to provide opportunities for young people, at risk of long term unemployment, to develop skills to help them become more employable. Employers can do this through:

- training to develop occupational related skills (specific to the job)
- training to develop employability skills (transferable skills)
- support to update their CV and interview preparation
- support to look for long-term work

We have no way of estimating at this stage the number of young people who will secure full-time employment when the JobStart Scheme ends but plan to gather this data as the scheme progresses.

The Department will encourage employers to retain the young person on completion of their job opportunity.

In order to help the young person secure full-time employment afterwards the Department is working closely with the Department for Economy to promote the Apprenticeships Scheme as a route for employers to retain the young person when the JobStart Scheme ends.

Work Coaches will also assist with jobsearch activities to help find a suitable opportunity for the young person when the scheme ends through their newly acquired skills.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the consideration of an increase of Carers Allowance benefits.

**(AQW 17983/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** As part of the annual up-rating exercise, these benefits were increased by the rate of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) as measured by CPI for the previous September. As a result of the April 2021 up-rating Carer's Allowance was increased to £67.60 a week.

In terms of the weekly rate payable under Carer's Allowance here, when the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions makes an Up-rating Order in Britain, my Department is empowered only to make a corresponding Order. My Department has no power to increase the amounts of benefit by a different or greater amount in the annual Up-rating Order.

Additionally, in terms of providing longer term additional financial support for carers here, it is anticipated that this will be considered as part of the upcoming welfare mitigations review.

**Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the demand for Housing Executive properties in Mid Ulster, broken down by bedroom size.

**(AQW 18003/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Table 1 below provides a breakdown of all applicants on the waiting list as of the 1st April 2021 within the Mid Ulster Local Government District boundary who have a 1st preference area of choice in Mid Ulster by calculated bedroom entitlement.

It should be noted that, in certain circumstances, the Housing Selection Scheme rules can afford an additional bedroom entitlement to an applicant, based on their individual needs. The bedroom entitlement in this dataset corresponds to the minimum bedroom requirements under the rules of the HSS, therefore the 'actual' bedroom need of some applicants included in it may vary from the 'calculated' need.

**Table 1**

Calculated Bedroom Entitlement	Number of Applicants
1	1184
2	569

Calculated Bedroom Entitlement	Number of Applicants
3	291
4	99
5	20
6	2
7	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>2167</b>

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities how many new social home starts had taken place in rural communities in 2020-21.

**(AQW 18035/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** 98 new social homes started in rural locations in the 2020/21 Social Housing Development Programme year

**Table 1: New social housing Starts in rural locations in 2020/21**

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Rural	Main Street	Doagh	New Build	Rural	6	2020/21	2022/23
Choice	9 Ringbuoy Cove	Cloughey	Rehab	Rural	1	2020/21	2020/21
North Belfast HA	5A The Brae	Ballygowan	Off-the-Shelf	Rural	3	2020/21	2021/22
North Belfast HA	7 Abbey Road	Millisle	Rehab	Rural	1	2020/21	2021/22
North Belfast HA	21 Copeland Avenue	Millisle	Rehab	Rural	1	2020/21	2021/22
Ark	Derrytrasna Road	Derrytrasna	New Build	Rural	12	2020/21	2021/22
Ark	Derrytrasna Road	Derrytrasna	New Build	Rural	2	2020/21	2021/22
Radius	158 Tassagh Road	Keady	New Build	Rural	1	2020/21	2021/22
Rural	42&44 Dromore Street	Rathfriland	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	Rural	2	2020/21	2020/21
Rural	21 Culowen Quay	Blackwatertown	Off-the-Shelf	Rural	1	2020/21	2020/21
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3	Dungiven	New Build	Rural	18	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3	Dungiven	New Build	Rural	4	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3A	Dungiven	New Build	Rural	1	2020/21	2022/23
Rural	Clonmeen Drive	Strathfoyle	New Build	Rural	6	2020/21	2021/22
Rural	52,53,54 Gortin Meadows	Newbuildings	Off-the-Shelf	Rural	3	2020/21	2020/21

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Ark	21 & 22 Woodvale Green	Dromara	Off-the-Shelf	Rural	2	2020/21	2020/21
Alpha	Fir Park	Ballymena	New Build	Rural	14	2020/21	2022/23
Apex Housing	27 Garvaghy Avenue	Portglenone	Rehab	Rural	1	2020/21	2020/21
Apex Housing	Bessbrook OTS (Carrick Vista)	Bessbrook	Off-the-Shelf	Rural	2	2020/21	2020/21
Ark	Carquillan Court	Hilltown	Off-the-Shelf	Rural	3	2020/21	2020/21
Clanmil	Sloane Crescent	Killyleagh	New Build	Rural	4	2020/21	2021/22
Clanmil	Sloane Crescent	Killyleagh	New Build	Rural	1	2020/21	2021/22
Radius	Blinne Court	Cloughoge	Off-the-Shelf	Rural	9	2020/21	2021/22

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities to outline a timetable for the managed migration of benefits; and whether her Department has the number of staff needed to manage reassessments of legacy benefit claimants.

**(AQW 18089/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Planning for Move to UC (formerly called Managed Migration) here, was temporarily paused in March 2020 to allow my Department to focus all available resources on the response to the increased demand for services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A start date for commencement of the Move to UC phase has yet to be confirmed. My Department will keep stakeholders advised when timings are more certain.

Due to the increased demand for benefits as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, my officials continue to monitor closely the resourcing requirements for service delivery and will take into account the number of staff required for the Move to UC phase at the appropriate time.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities (i) whether there is a difference in the application to, and processing of, the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for members of security forces as opposed to those who are not; and (ii) to outline the rationale for any differences.

**(AQW 18199/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Scheme for the Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings (SPED) is administered by the Housing Executive

It is the responsibility of the Housing Executive and Police to assess eligibility under the criteria. There is an administrative difference in the processing of Security Forces applications and Civilian applications under the SPED scheme.

Security Forces applicants obtain the SPED application form from PSNI Emergency Housing Unit or the Prison Service. Completed Security Forces applications are returned directly to PSNI Emergency Housing Unit for assessment. Only those Security Forces applications which meet the criterion are then submitted to the Housing Executive for assessment under the first criterion.

The rationale for this difference in the administration of SPED applications for members of the security forces is to minimise the sharing of security force members' personal data to only the extent necessary and essential for the processing of their applications.

All applications which meet both eligibility criteria are processed thereafter in the same way under SPED by Housing Executive Land Asset & Policy Unit in relation to the purchase of the property.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities what progress she has made with the Minister of Finance and HMRC on reducing or removing VAT from labour and equipment purchased to retrofit houses with energy efficient heating alternatives.

**(AQW 18236/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I have not held discussions with the Minister of Finance or HMRC about reducing or removing VAT from labour and equipment to retrofit houses.

VAT is an Excepted Matter that is the responsibility of Treasury.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the recommendations on the sub-regional stadia that were due to be published at the end of April 2021.

**(AQW 18238/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I can confirm that my officials met with the Advisory Working Group on 28 April 2021 to review the evidence gathered in full and discuss the development of proposals the shape and scope of the Programme going forward.

I have asked my officials to provide me with an analysis of all the evidence gathered, including details from the latest discussion from the Advisory Working Group meeting. This will inform my update to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme in the coming weeks.

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Waterside Shared Village.

**(AQW 18271/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** In February 2018, the **Waterside Shared Village** project was awarded £6.8m under Action 3.1 (Shared Spaces Capital Development) of the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (PEACE IV 2014-20). Delivery of the project is led by Derry City & Strabane District Council in partnership with Irish Street Youth & Community Association and Hillcrest Community Trust.

Ten Project Board meetings have been held to date with the latest on 14 April 2021. Woodvale Construction have been appointed as the main contractor and construction is due to commence in June 2021.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities how many social housing new builds are needed to address Housing Executive waiting lists in North Down.

**(AQW 18281/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** New build social housing is delivered via the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP). The SHDP is formulated taking account of the five year housing need projection by settlement. The five year projected need for the North Down Parliamentary Constituency is 551 new social homes.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the number of unpaid carers; and what steps she is taking to support these carers.

**(AQW 18300/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The figures from the 2011 Census indicate that over 212,000 people here identified as a carer and were providing some form of unpaid care from a few hours per week upwards to 50 hours per week – other reports since indicate that figure to have grown, some suggesting during the pandemic to be as high as 360,000.

My Department has responsibility for administering Carer's Allowance. I am aware that the benefit caseload numbers will not fully capture all of those people in our community that provide some degree of unpaid care and support for an ill, older or disabled family member, or friend. However the most recent figures available from November 2020 indicate that the number of claimants of Carer's Allowance is 75,610 people, with 49,870 of those in receipt of a Carers's Allowance payment.

Those carers on a low income can access additional financial support from my Department through income-related benefits and their associated carer premiums/additions. Carers in receipt of Universal Credit will also be able to benefit from the increase in the standard allowance put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of providing longer term additional financial support for carers here, it is anticipated that this will be considered as part of the upcoming welfare mitigations review.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for Communities what support and funding her Department is providing to GAA clubs in the East Derry constituency.

**(AQW 18360/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** In terms of financial support, over the past 3 years my Department and Sport NI has provided almost £250,000 of financial support directly to GAA clubs in the East Derry constituency as outlined in Annex A. These lists include Covid support provided through the Sports Hardship Fund and the Covid Safe PPE Packs.

In addition to the details set out in the Annex, Sport NI also provided funding through the Sports Sustainability Fund (SSF) of just over £750,000 to Derry GAA Board for issue to clubs across the county. Details of SSF awards to these clubs, which includes East Derry constituency, can be found at <http://www.sportni.net/funding/our-funding-programmes/sports-sustainability-fund/sports-sustainability-fund-awards-list/ulster-council-gaa-approved-award/>.



Sport NI is offering ongoing free training for sports clubs and organisations through its “Supporting Sport to Build Back Better: Business Capability Support” programme. Over the next 12 months training will be offered on topics such as Business, Strategic and Financial Planning.

**Annex A****Direct Support from Department for Communities**

Small Capital Grants Programme	2018/2019	2019/20	2020/21
Limavady Wolfhounds GAC	£3,500		
O' Brien's Foreglen	£1,500		£4,703
Cumann Iománaíochta Chaoimhín Uí Loingsigh	£5,000		£3,500
John Mitchel's GAC			£2,368
St Canice's GAC			£1,500
St Mary's GAC Faughanvale			£4,052

**Covid Safe Sports PPE Packs Provided by Sport NI in 2020/21**

- Owen Roe GAC Coleraine,
- Sarsfields Ballerin Camogie Club,
- Ballerin GAC,
- St Joseph's GAC (Craigbane),
- John Mitchel's GAC,
- St Canice's GAC,
- Limavady Wolfhounds,
- O'Briens Foreglen GAC,
- St Mary's GAC (Banagher),
- St Colms GAC Drum,
- St Patrick's Camogie Club Dungiven

**Financial Support from Sport NI**

Year	East Derry GAA Club	Programme	Grant Amount
2018/19	Ballerin GAC	Pitch Maintenance Programme 2018	£28,980
2018/19	St Mary's GAC (Faughanvale)	Provision of Automatic External Defibrillator	N/A
2019/20	St Joseph's GAC (Craigbane)	Pitch Maintenance Programme 2018	£28,750
2019/20	St Canice's Gaelic Athletic Club	Pitch Maintenance Programme 2018	£30,000
2019/20	Derry GAA County Board	Provision of CCTV/PA system at Celtic Park	£21,955
2020/21	Ballerin GAC	Sports Hardship Fund	£3,000
2020/21	John Mitchel's GAC	Sports Hardship Fund	£3,000
2020/21	St. Canices GAA	Sports Hardship Fund	£3,000
2020/21	Derry GAA County Board	Safety Management - Control Rooms	£37,450
2020/21	Derry GAA County Board	Provision of CCTV/PA system at Celtic Park	£21,955
2020/21	Derry GAA	Sports Hardship Fund	£2,000
2020/21	St.Marys Banagher GAC	Sports Hardship Fund	£3,000
2020/21	St Mary's GAC (Faughanvale)	Sports Hardship Fund	£3,000
2020/21	St COLMS GAC DRUM	Sports Hardship Fund	£3,000
2020/21	Cumann Iomaníochta Caoimhín Uí Loingsigh	Sports Hardship Fund	£1,000
2020/21	Kevin Lynch Hurling Club	Sports Hardship Fund	£2,000
2020/21	St Matthew's Gaelic Athletic Club	Sports Hardship Fund	£3,000
2021/22	St. Canices GAA	Project Re-Boot:Team Up	£16,191

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the progress made to take forward the recommendations published by the Housing Supply Forum in 2016.

**(AQW 18395/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Supply Forum Report made 10 recommendations to increase housing supply.

A table setting out progress against each recommendation is included below. It should be noted that not all recommendations are for DfC to consider and I have not sought updates on those that fall to other departments.

No.	Recommendation	Lead Department / Update
1	Consideration should be given to adopting a policy of “presumption in favour of sustainable development”	Department for Infrastructure
2	Publication and analysis of key performance information arising from local council planning decisions should be undertaken at suitably regular intervals for each council area.	Department for Infrastructure
3	Consideration should be given to completion of a mapping exercise overlapping demand with availability and zoning information and to allowing the construction industry to have access to data on available public land. To enable this to be progressed a meeting should be convened with the DFP Minister / OFMDFM with a view to targets being set for the release of publically owned land.	<p>Department for Communities</p> <p>The Public Land for Housing Project ran from May 2017 to March 2021. The Project has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developed a digital map of DfC assets which has been published online on the Spatial NI platform;</li> <li>Provided the baseline data for the Land and Property Services (LPS) Government Land and Property Register (GLPR) project; and</li> <li>Developed new collaborative cross departmental partnerships to explore the release of unused land across the public sector.</li> </ul> <p>The Project was also set and achieved a Programme for Government target to identify and secure the release of 10 sites for housing by March 2021.</p>
4	There should be increased encouragement and support from Government for joint ventures between housing associations and private developers, including ‘design and build’	<p>Department for Communities</p> <p>Through the Social Housing Development Programme, Housing Associations bring forward a number of schemes under the competitive design and build method of procurement each year. This has been increasing year on year and provides much needed social housing in areas of greatest need. A review of this procurement method is currently underway. The Department has been working to ensure that the Council’s Local Development Plans approach is procurement compliant. When considering proposed housing developments, where a social housing need has already been identified, local councils can require private developers to provide a certain number/ percentage of affordable homes within their Local Development Plans.</p>
5	We recommend that independent empirical research be carried out with both statutory authorities and the development community into housing delivery time frames, to determine the actual time frames being experienced.	<p>Department for Communities</p> <p>Recommendation not progressed at this time</p>
6	Housing policy should encompass the sector as a whole, rather than its constituent parts.	<p>Department for Communities</p> <p>The Department will soon publish the Call for Evidence on the draft Housing Strategy. The Strategy proposes a whole system approach to addressing Housing challenges. The whole system approach emphasises the central role of people, places and communities in considering and delivering on our housing needs and demands.</p>

No.	Recommendation	Lead Department / Update
7	Powers should be available to the new local councils to enable sites to be assembled for the benefit of the whole community and to ensure the appropriate delivery of housing need. As the new councils are new entities, additional or amended legislation may be required	Department for Communities Recommendation not progressed at this time
8	Consideration should be given to the methodology used to calculate Road and Sewer Bond values and the release of bond capital in a timely manner as construction proceeds. There should also be investigation of whether there is an alternative approach, other than bonds, which would still ensure a high standard of infrastructure	Department for Infrastructure
9	Any further increase in Building Regulation requirements incurring additional build costs should be deferred until volumes have recovered significantly.	Department of Finance
10	We suggest conducting a pilot study to track selected housing development projects through the approval and delivery process with the purpose of identifying and removing barriers or blockages that may exist in the current system to enable a more streamlined process to be developed for NI. This should be with a view to examining the potential for the establishment of a Virtual Delivery Unit at an appropriate time.	Department for Communities Recommendation not progressed at this time

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many people in Northern Ireland are on Universal Credit; and (ii) of that number, how many individuals do not receive welfare mitigation support for (a) benefit cap; (b) social sector size criteria, known as the bedroom tax; or (c) benefit cap and social sector size criteria.

**(AQW 18397/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The most recent published statistical data for Universal Credit and Welfare Mitigations Support is available at:

- <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-ni-uc-stats-nov-2020.pdf>
- <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-annual-report-welfare-supplementary-payments-discretionary-support-standards-of-advice-assistance-and-sanctions-annual-report-2019-20.pdf>
- <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/benefit-cap-statistics-nov-2020.pdf>

It is important to note that entitlement to welfare mitigation support is dependent on individual circumstances. Therefore, not everyone claiming Universal Credit will be entitled to support for benefit cap, social sector size criteria or both.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities (i) for an update on funding packages her Department has issued to local councils to assist with town and village recovery from COVID-19; and (ii) whether she will introduce further funding packages in the current financial year.

**(AQW 18446/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department has provided a wide range of support to local councils in order to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and support recovery in settlements of all sizes.

The Department was allocated £85.3 million from the Executive for councils to alleviate projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs during 2020-21. This has been fully allocated to local councils and will help ensure Councils can positively contribute to local economic, social and environmental recovery, and help to play a very vital role in that recovery.

In addition to mainstream regeneration programmes within which my Department works closely with councils on an ongoing basis, DfC also initiated the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme. This allocated £19.3m to council areas to support the Revitalisation Plans developed by councils in conjunction with key stakeholders in their areas and which were bespoke to the identified needs of each council area. DfC contributed £12m towards the Programme, with additional contributions of £5m and £2.3m from Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

Over £8m was used by councils to fund small business grants to prepare premises for reopening. This included support for the provision of hand sanitising stations, safety screens and signage in town and village centres.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Communities whether she will bring forward proposals to allow council's to utilise capital borrowing powers and capitalisation schemes to assist with Voluntary Severance Schemes.

**(AQW 18450/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Section 19(5) of the Local Government Finance Act (NI) 2011 allows my Department to issue capitalisation directions to councils. This permits, in very limited circumstances, specified items of expenditure normally classified as revenue to be treated as capital expenditure.

Treasury currently has an overall capitalisation limit for here of £3.4m. My officials have prepared a business case seeking to give councils more flexibility by increasing their capitalisation threshold from the current £3.4m in order to deliver efficiencies. As a result of the business case prepared by my officials, DoF is currently preparing to approach Treasury with a proposal to increase the capitalisation threshold on my Department's behalf.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Communities whether she will bring forward proposals to allow councils to restructure their outstanding loans without penalty to aid financial circumstances as a result of the pandemic.

**(AQW 18451/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Councils may apply to the Department of Finance (DoF) for loans from the Consolidated Fund or take out commercial loans with private sector providers. Loans from the Consolidated Fund are agreed by DoF, including the term of the loan and the interest rates that will apply.

My officials continue to liaise with councils through ALGFO (Association of Local Government Finance Officers) and SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) and DoF to ascertain if there are options to restructure loans that could be utilised.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Communities whether extended trading hours has been considered to assist with the recovery of retail and to reduce the potential for crowding.

**(AQW 18474/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The main legislation governing retail trading hours for which I am responsible is the Shops (Sunday Trading &c.) (NI) Order 1997 (the 1997 Order). This allows small shops unrestricted opening on Sundays while large shops (i.e. those with a floor area exceeding 280 square metres) are restricted to opening for a maximum of five hours between 1.00pm and 6.00pm.

I understand that some district councils have taken the decision not to pursue enforcement of Sunday trading hours thereby allowing retailers to trade for longer hours.

The Minister for Economy, Diane Dodds, MLA, leads on the economic recovery.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the draft Sexual Orientation Strategy; and when it will be issued for public consultation.

**(AQW 18513/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Sexual Orientation Expert Advisory Panel Report was published on 5 March 2021.

A public consultation exercise is scheduled for later this year and the Strategy is due to be published in December 2021, subject to Executive approval.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities when her Department will formally respond to the Second Independent Review of the Personal Independence Payment Assessment Process.

**(AQW 18514/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I refer the Member to my answer of 23 December 2020 to AQW 12039/17-22. A formal response will be published shortly.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities when her Department's new fuel poverty strategy will be published.

**(AQW 18519/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Department for Economy has recently launched a consultation on options for a new Energy Strategy and my Department will soon issue a Call for Evidence for a Housing Supply Strategy. Responses to these will help inform future development of a Fuel Poverty Strategy.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities, given the UK government's commitments to eradicate the use of fossil fuels as part of its preparations to host the United Nations Climate Change Conference, whether she will review the Affordable Warmth Scheme, including its subsidies, that supports the continued use of fossil fuels.

**(AQW 18520/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** A new Fuel Poverty Strategy and associated actions will need to be developed which align with the Energy and Green Growth strategies, including how energy efficiency measures will be delivered in the future.

My Department continues to work closely with colleagues in the Department for the Economy with lead responsibility for the new Energy Strategy and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs with lead responsibility for the Green Growth Strategy.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities what work her Department and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive are undertaking in partnership with the Department for the Economy to prepare for the retrofitting of around 50,000 homes per annum to make them energy efficient as part of the programme to make the Northern Ireland economy net zero in carbon emissions by 2050.

**(AQW 18521/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department continues to work with colleagues in the Department for the Economy with lead responsibility for the new Energy Strategy and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs with lead responsibility for the Green Growth Strategy.

A senior official represents my Department on the Energy Strategy Government Stakeholder Group. Housing officials work with colleagues in the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy team in the Energy Efficiency, Heat and Consumer Working Groups supporting the work of the Stakeholder Group. The outputs from the Working Groups informed the options consultation on the Energy Strategy which was recently published.

Both the Department, from Ministerial level through senior and other officials, and Housing Executive sit on the many fora within DfC, DfE and DAERA to represent the interests of domestic housing and households in relation to developments around energy efficiency and climate change.

I am aware that DfE is developing plans for an energy efficiency home retrofit pilot scheme to test energy efficiency approaches. DfC officials are working closely with DfE as this develops.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for Communities whether she has considered implementing an anti-poverty Act.

**(AQW 18540/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Consideration of an Anti-Poverty Act is one of a range of recommendations contained in the report of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel, which was published on 5 March 2021. The report can be found at:

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/report-anti-poverty-strategy-expert-advisory-panel>.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the programmes in West Tyrone targeted at tackling loneliness, especially among older people.

**(AQW 18552/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department through the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund provides financial support to community based organisations who deliver a range of programmes in West Tyrone to target loneliness, especially among older people including Good Morning Service, Meals on Wheels Service, Handyman Service, health initiatives, health check days, arts & crafts courses, counselling, mindfulness programmes and physical activity classes.

Additionally our Arts & Older People Programme, which is administered by Arts Council was set up to increase opportunities for older people to engage with the arts.

It achieves this by providing funding to arts-based projects that address related social issues such as poverty, isolation and loneliness, as well as promoting positive mental health.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for Communities how many changes of tenancy have occurred in the private rented sector since the start of the pandemic.

**(AQW 18601/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** A tenancy agreement is a contractual arrangement entered in to by both landlord and tenant. My Department has no role in these arrangements and therefore has no information regarding the number of changes of tenancy in the private rented sector since the start of the pandemic.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 17477/17-22, when she will bring forward legislation that will enable councillors and council staff to be able to meet remotely and work from home in line with Executive's Covid-19 guidelines.

**(AQW 18610/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Following the Executive's agreement to my proposal to bring forward a Bill to extend the legislation to allow council meetings to be held remotely, I can confirm that the Bill is in the process of being drafted and that my Department is working to bring forward this legislation as soon as possible.

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Communities how many people in the Strangford constituency are waiting for a personal independence payment appeal.

**(AQW 18613/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department does not record information based on constituency. However, the number of Personal Independence Payment appeals pending for Newtownards, a town within the Strangford constituency is 371 as at 30 April 2021.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the cost of benefit fraud to her Department in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18658/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I refer to my response to AQW 16023/17-22. The Department's Annual Report & Accounts includes information on the estimated levels of fraud and error in social security benefits. The table below sets out the most up to date information available from the published reports.

**Estimated levels of loss due to Benefit Fraud**

Year	Total Benefit Expenditure £million	Estimated Benefit Fraud £million	Estimated Benefit Fraud % of Benefit Expenditure
2017	5,897	55.1	0.9%
2018	6,109	56.2	0.9%
2019	6,355	65.2	1.0%

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Communities to detail her Department's spend on (a) maintenance; and (b) promoting Navan / Emain Macha, Armagh, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18678/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** General maintenance and site presentation at our sites is carried out internally by our Conservation Works and Ranger Teams. As there are 190 State Care Monuments it is not possible to proportion staff costs between each monument.

Because Navan Fort is an earthwork monument and is not being actively grazed or farmed, its overall condition is relatively stable. Large-scale interventions are often neither necessary, nor considered appropriate ('minimum intervention'). However, a regular regime of grounds maintenance is in place including grass-cutting, litter-picking, re-fencing (stock-proofing), painting of gates, emptying bins, landscaping (including tree-surgery works), and maintaining appropriate signage and access.

My Officials have reviewed additional expenditure for the period 2018 to present at Navan Fort; the amount for this period where it is possible to extract this from more general accounts amounts to £79,064.20. Individual years are broken down in the table below. I should stress that this is the items that can be separated from more general accounts, and excludes staff costs.

**Table 1: Summary of expenditure at Navan Fort relating to maintenance activities**

Activity	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Maintenance	£39,207	£6,697.20	£26,688
Site Management Plan	£3,535.50	£0	£0
Tree Survey and Report	£0	£2,112.50	£0
Signage	£0	£824	£0
<b>Total</b>	<b>£42,742.50</b>	<b>£9,633.70</b>	<b>£26,688</b>
<b>Overall Total</b>	<b>£79,064.20</b>		

My Department actively promotes all of our State Care Monuments through social media platforms such as #LoverheritageNI and on discovernorthernireland.com. My Department also facilitates applications for events at Navan Fort as well as academic research and survey activities resulting in publication and other forms of public engagement.

The history and archaeology of Navan Fort is in addition effectively presented to the public at the Navan Centre which is owned and run by Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. My Department will continue to work closely with all relevant partners, and particularly the Council, to promote this highly significant archaeological site as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the budget available for the JobStart scheme and the number of employment opportunities that will be created as a result of the scheme.

**(AQW 18685/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I would refer to AQW16626/17-22 which sets out the details requested.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities whether the review on the Caravan Act will include motor homes using caravan sites and council sites.

**(AQW 18729/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The terms of reference for the review have yet to be agreed. However, while the Caravans Act 2011 does not cover motor homes, any issues raised during the review regarding motor homes would be passed to the relevant Department to take forward.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Communities whether fans will be permitted to attend the latter stage matches of the 2020/21 Irish Cup and Irish League Cup; and to provide the rationale or data that supports this decision.

**(AQW 18741/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I can confirm that the Executive has announced that from 24 May up to 500 spectators will be able to attend outdoor sporting events subject to adherence with Governing Body protocols, the Health advice including social distancing, good hygiene and face coverings, and compliance with the Health regulations.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for Communities whether she has considered introducing legislation that makes it unlawful to deny people goods and services due to their socio-economic status.

**(AQW 18742/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Consideration of introducing legislation that makes it unlawful to deny people goods and services due to their socio-economic status is one of a range of recommendations contained in the report of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel, which was published on 5 March 2021.

The report can be found at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/report-anti-poverty-strategy-expert-advisory-panel>.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment on poverty levels if no progression is made on implementing a Living Wage.

**(AQW 18744/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I am committed to tackling both the negative effects and the causes of poverty in our society. My Department is leading the development of an Anti-Poverty Strategy that, working collaboratively across all departments, will tackle inequalities and obstacles that directly affect the everyday lives of those experiencing poverty.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Communities what progress has been made in ensuring supporters return to IFA matches under prevailing COVID-19 regulations.

**(AQW 18778/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** At their meeting on 13 May, the Executive agreed that from 24 May, up to 500 spectators can attend organised outdoor sports fixtures or events where the sports Governing Body, club or venue operator can ensure compliance with social distancing, control numbers accordingly and have appropriate hygiene regimes in place.

## Department of Education

**Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Education to outline when her Department will provide universities with the intake numbers for the PGCE cohort of 2021/22.

**(AQW 16671/17-22)**

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** Following consultation with the Department for the Economy (which has responsibility for funding Initial Teacher Education (ITE)), the Department of Education informed the four Higher Education Institutions on 23 March 2021 that it had decided to retain ITE intakes (for both Bachelor of Education (BE) and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses) at current levels for the 2021/22 academic year.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 17483/17-22, to outline the potentially repercussive effects of mandatory autism training for teachers of autistic pupils on other areas of special educational needs.

**(AQW 18409/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Following the NI Assembly motion in February 2020 to explore the introduction of mandatory autism training for all teachers and classroom assistants, the Department has received a number of requests to consider mandatory training in relation to other incidences of Special Educational Needs (SEN).

The Education Authority's Children and Young People's Services Training Programme for 2020-21 (<https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/children-and-young-peoples-services-training-programme-2020-2021>) offers a bespoke range of specialist training for education professionals (as well as parents) from a range of services, including the Autism Advisory and Intervention Service.

As outlined in AQW 17483/17-22, the Department's Learning Leaders Strategy signals a move away from 'top-down' and 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to staff development, with teachers reflecting routinely on their own practice and assuming responsibility for their own professional learning and development, in conjunction with school leaders and based on the needs of pupils. It is then for the school leaders to identify and plan the professional development required for their own schools, providing staff with access to professional learning as their careers progress and specific incidences of SEN are presented in their classrooms.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Education what action his Department is taking to ensure the wearing of face masks in secondary schools is being implemented consistently across Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18480/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Since the return of schools, the common aim has been to keep them safe for children and staff, prioritise children's education and ensure that any impact on overall transmission is as low as possible. In order to achieve this the introduction of an additional mitigating measure was introduced, i.e. the requirement for post-primary pupils to wear masks to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 with the wearing of face coverings playing an important role in reducing the risk across our communities.

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.

It is up to the individual schools to implement the wearing of face masks, however, as this remains as guidance and recommended good practice, it is at the school's discretion on how to enforce this.

If an individual or group is dissatisfied with the level of compliance provided by the school, the school should have a process by which concerns may be raised. Alternatively, the school will have a complaints procedure available to parents, carers, and other stakeholders that should be used to raise any issues.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Education to provide a breakdown of the Shared Education Budget, per school, for each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18541/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The tables below provide a breakdown of the Shared Education budget for partnerships involved in the Shared Education Signature Project (SESP) and the Peace IV Collaboration through Sharing in Education (CASE) programme for each of the last three academic years. The information has been provided by the Education Authority which makes the programme allocations on a partnership basis, therefore it has not been possible to provide the information per school. The funding allocations support pupil engagement and capacity building.

The Peace IV Sharing from the Start project has been awarded up to €4.3m to deliver Shared Education to pre-school settings in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland for the period of the project ie: 2016 to 2021.

#### Shared Education Budget by academic year – SESP

Partnerships Schools	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Antrim Primary School; Saint Comgall's Primary School	29,465	22,303	7,946
Aughnacloy Primary School; St Mary's Primary School Aughnacloy	22,871	16,581	6,812
Ballymacrickett Primary School; Ballinderry Primary School	22,493	17,463	6,812
Ballymoney High School; Dalriada School; Our Lady of Lourdes High School	48,990	33,576	18,022
Ballynahinch Primary School; St Patrick's Primary School	21,360	19,481	6,812
Ballyoran Primary School; Bocombra Primary School	23,356	19,218	6,812
Banbridge High School; St Patrick's College, Banbridge	37,452	22,143	7,568
Brookeborough Primary School; St Mary's Primary School, Brookeborough	19,500	20,060	7,612
Broughshane Primary School; St Patrick's Primary School	29,812	23,981	6,812
Brownlee Primary School; Fort Hill Integrated Primary School;	19,350	21,272	6,812
Bush Primary School; Windmill Integrated Primary School	42,133	21,579	14,896



<b>Partnerships Schools</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
Castledawson Primary School; New Row Primary School	14,870	15,876	6,812
Castleroe Primary School; Ballyhackett Primary School	18,204	18,002	6,812
Cathedral Nursery School; Hope Nursery School	36,146	26,384	10,912
Cookstown Primary School; Holy Trinity Primary School; Phoenix Integrated Primary School	58,433	45,138	18,216
Cross and Passion College; Ballycastle High School	60,091	39,199	7,568
St Mary's Primary School; Cumber Claudy Primary School	17,950	18,892	6,812
Derryboy Primary School; St Caolan's Primary school	19,470	15,901	6,812
Derryhale Primary School; St Oliver Plunkett's, Ballyhegan	17,540	15,440	6,812
Dromore Nursery School; Drumnamoe Nursery School	62,804	46,244	12,492
Dromore Road Primary School; St Bronagh's Primary School	19,235	21,231	6,812
Drumglass High School; Integrated College Dungannon; St Patrick's College	40,010	28,206	11,352
Duneane Primary School; Moneynick Primary School	14,905	16,605	6,812
Dungannon Primary School; St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon	44,501	21,802	6,812
Friends' School Lisburn; St Dominic's High School	42,820	20,541	7,568
Gaelscoil na Daróige; Groarty Integrated Primary School	20,500	12,323	-
Harberton School; Taughmonagh Primary School	24,047	20,830	6,812
Hazelwood Integrated College; Edmund Rice College	43,626	12,378	-
Holy Child Primary School; Ebrington Primary School	31,895	20,415	6,812
Holy Cross Nursery School; Edenderry Nursery School	51,868	34,063	13,712
Holy Family Primary School; Omagh County Primary School	25,012	19,623	6,812
Holy Family Primary, Teconnaught; Academy Primary School, Saintfield	29,409	19,533	8,419
Holy Trinity College; Cookstown High School	34,087	21,796	7,568
Holy Trinity Nursery Unit; Enniskillen Integrated Nursery Unit; Enniskillen Nursery School	27,180	21,726	10,218
Howard Primary School; Edendork Primary School	23,182	19,920	6,812
Killowen Primary School; St Johns Primary School	37,984	53,710	12,158
Kilross Primary School; Gaelscoil Na Speirini	16,620	13,901	6,812
Knocknagin Primary School; Desertmartin Primary School	16,722	14,452	6,812
Knockahollet Primary School; St Anne's Primary School	38,776	56,243	14,312
Lack Primary School; St Joseph's Primary School, Enniskillen; Kesh Primary School	25,898	24,372	10,218
Lagan College; Our Lady & St Patrick's College, Knock; Grosvenor Grammar School	38,959	16,960	11,352
Larne High School; St Killian's College; Roddensvale School; Larne Grammar School	51,960	27,780	14,758
Limavady High School; St Mary's High School, Limavady	86,336	40,243	15,568
Lismore Comprehensive School; Brownlow Integrated College	37,882	19,808	7,568
Long Tower Primary School; Fountain Primary School	15,576	13,048	6,812
Loreto College; St Joseph's College; Coleraine Grammar School	35,810	14,740	7,568
Lurgan Junior High School; St Ronan's College	34,055	18,720	7,568
Maguiresbridge Primary School; St Mary's Primary School, Maguiresbridge	24,696	19,412	7,212
Market Hill Primary School; St Patrick's Primary School, Crossmaglen	26,140	19,443	6,812
Mercy College; Belfast Boys Model School	43,689	23,687	7,568
Millburn Primary School; St Malachys Primary School	24,766	17,562	6,812

<b>Partnerships Schools</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
Mitchell House School; Ashfield Boys' High School; St. Joseph's College; St. Joseph's Primary School	50,255	41,325	14,380
Moat Primary School; St Ronan's Primary School	52,272	41,138	8,612
Mount St Michael's Primary School; Randalstown Central Primary School	23,125	22,689	9,960
New-Bridge Integrated College; Banbridge High School	34,385	34,767	7,568
Newmills Primary School; St Mary's Primary School, Lisbuoy	18,759	18,679	9,812
Oakfield Primary School; Acorn Integrated Primary School	20,230	18,489	6,812
Parkhall Integrated College; St Benedict's College; Antrim Grammar School	44,758	26,843	13,053
Poyntzpass Primary School; St Joseph's and St James Primary School	19,687	17,289	6,812
Presentation Primary School; Hart Memorial Primary School	33,120	21,003	6,812
Rasharkin Primary School; St Patrick's Primary School	29,671	32,888	12,062
Rathenraw IPS (Six Mile Integrated Primary); Ballycraig Primary School	24,850	21,100	6,812
Roscavey Primary School; McClintock Primary School; St Colmcille's Primary School	58,268	47,677	19,718
Seaview Primary School; Carnalbanagh Primary School; Carnlough Integrated Primary School	20,239	21,279	10,218
St Anne's Primary School; Ballyvester Primary School	27,474	14,805	6,812
St Bernard's Primary School; Cregagh Primary School; Lisnasharragh Primary School	40,585	31,132	10,218
St Brigid's Primary School; Ballykeel Primary School	30,827	18,678	6,812
St Brigid's Primary School; Cloughmills Primary School	24,135	17,256	6,812
St Brigid's Primary School, Magherafelt; Knockloughrim Primary School	26,173	20,676	6,812
St Catherine's College, Armagh; City of Armagh High School; The Royal School, Armagh; St Patrick's Grammar School, Armagh	55,301	35,670	15,136
St Cecilia's College; Lisneal College; St Mary's College	52,725	29,970	11,352
St Colm's High School; Fort Hill Integrated College	28,709	17,964	7,568
St Colman's Primary School & All Saints' Nursery Unit; Fair Hill Primary School	20,903	20,915	10,972
St Colman's Primary School; Dunmurry Primary School; Seymour Hill Primary School	36,680	28,831	10,218
St Columba's College; Glastry College; Strangford College	48,902	16,284	7,568
St Columba's Primary School; Kilrea Primary School	34,840	34,290	13,812
St James's Primary School and Nursery Unit; Whitehouse Primary School and Nursery Unit	53,714	45,270	13,112
St John the Baptist Primary School; Edenderry Primary School	29,560	18,867	6,812
St John Bosco Primary School; Bellaghy Primary School	24,055	18,317	6,812
St John's College; Dromore Controlled Primary School; Tummery Primary School; Drumlish Primary School	80,610	33,805	14,002
St John's Primary School; Eden Primary School	18,660	20,604	6,812
St John's Primary School, Londonderry; Lisnagelvin Primary School	34,833	23,161	6,812
St John's Primary School, Moy; Moy Regional Primary School	16,813	15,190	6,812
St Joseph's Primary School; Greystone Primary School	37,599	36,125	15,974
St Joseph's Primary School, Tyrella; Newcastle Primary School	25,230	18,477	6,812
St Louis Grammar School; Kilkeel High School	50,725	23,600	7,568
St Macartan's Primary School; Aghadrumsee Primary School; St Tierney's Primary School	21,486	12,963	10,218
St Malachy's College; Belfast Royal Academy	39,276	20,962	7,568

<b>Partnerships Schools</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
St Mary's High School; Nendrum College	28,994	21,072	7,568
St Mary's Primary School; Ballytrea Primary School	18,140	17,031	6,812
St Mary's Primary School; Fivemiletown Controlled Primary School; Fivemiletown Nursery School	16,653	16,132	10,218
St Mary's Primary School; Newtownbutler Primary School; St Joseph's Primary School	15,890	21,109	10,218
St Naile's Primary School; St Mary's Primary School; Florencecourt Primary; St Mary's Mullymesker	22,179	21,228	13,624
St Nicholas Primary School; Carrickfergus Model Primary School; Sunnyslans Primary School	23,741	23,451	10,218
St Olcan's Primary School; Armoy Primary School	9,300	13,838	6,812
St Patrick's Academy; Royal School Dungannon	49,920	24,316	7,568
St Patricks Academy Lisburn; Laurelhill Community College	31,588	18,100	7,568
St Patrick's & St Brigid's Primary School; Ballycastle Integrated Primary School	23,909	20,983	7,379
St Patrick's Primary School, Mullanaskea; Enniskillen Model Primary School	22,883	19,356	6,812
St Patrick's Primary School; Kirkistown Primary School	20,918	16,060	6,812
St Patrick's Primary School; Windsor Hill Primary School	28,435	21,431	6,812
St Paul's Primary School; Irvinestown Primary School; Ballinamallard Primary School;	27,078	24,448	10,218
St Paul's High School; Newtownhamilton High School; Newry High School; St Joseph's High School	83,616	72,924	31,900
St Pius X College; Magherafelt High School; Rainey Endowed; St Mary's Grammar School; Sperrin Integrated; Kilronan Special School	63,146	54,708	22,326
St Ronan's College; Lurgan College	27,289	23,648	7,568
Saint Teresa's Primary School; Portadown Integrated Primary School	19,744	21,296	9,972
St Teresa's Primary School, Tullyherron; Mountnorris Primary School	17,421	15,572	6,812
St Therese Nursery School; Fort Hill Integrated Nursery Unit	21,329	15,347	6,812
Saint Vincent de Paul Primary School; Ligoniel Primary School; St Gerard's SS	52,155	33,131	10,218
Steeple Nursery School; Saint Joseph's Nursery School; Riverside Special School	49,314	30,929	16,632
Straidbilly Primary School; Barnish Primary School	21,075	12,789	6,812
Tempo Primary School; St Mary's Primary School, Tempo	24,020	16,198	6,812
The High School Ballynahinch; St Colman's High School; St Colmcille's High School; Assumption Grammar School	58,449	56,948	26,515
Wellington College; Aquinas Grammar School	32,006	17,313	7,568
Woods Primary School; St Trea's Primary School	25,792	19,506	6,812
Blackwater Integrated College; De La Salle High School; St Mary's High School	40,540	25,040	11,352
Gibson Primary School; St Mary's Primary School	24,387	20,001	6,812
Bangor Academy & Sixth Form College; Bangor GS; St Columbanus' College	50,290	29,400	11,352
Beechlawn School; Ballymacash Primary School; St Aloysius PS	24,305	30,180	10,218
Birches PS; St Mary's PS Maghery;	20,152	17,379	6,812
Dunclug College; St Patrick's College	36,879	16,158	7,568
Harpur's Hill PS; St Malachy's PS	20,090	22,954	6,812
Langfield PS; St Joseph's PS; Castlederg HS; Ardstraw Jubilee PS; St Caireall's PS; Killen PS; Erganagh PS	34,514	42,180	20,814
Loreto GS; Christian Bros GS; Sacred Heart College; Omagh HS, Arvalee School; Omagh Academy	91,150	62,528	22,326

<b>Partnerships Schools</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
Portglenone PS; St Mary's PS	18,274	18,048	6,812
Seagoe PS; St John's PS	28,639	18,951	6,812
Sion Mills PS; Strabane Controlled PS	19,202	16,815	6,812
St Colmcille's PS; Carniny PS	22,152	18,534	6,812
St Joseph's PS Crumlin; Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach; Crumlin IPS; Crumlin Int College	39,126	23,957	14,002
St Macartan's Convent PS; Carntall PS; Aughter Central PS	34,648	23,815	10,218
St Michael's PS Finnis; Dromara PS	24,820	17,348	6,812
St Oliver Plunkett Nursery & PS; Cooley PS & NS	15,080	14,038	6,812
St Patrick's PS; Seaview PS	32,990	22,600	6,812
Larne and Inver PS; St Anthony's PS	20,397	16,870	6,812
Tullygally PS; Drumgor PS	21,576	18,366	6,812
Drumachose PS; Termoncanice PS	31,795	24,316	9,812
Eglinton PS; Broadbridge PS	21,538	18,978	6,812
Fivemiletown College; St Ciaran's College	41,275	20,106	7,568
St Mary's PS; Maghera PS	20,701	15,298	6,812
St Eugene's PS; Dunmullan PS	14,239	13,838	9,812
Oakwood IPS; Christ the Redeemer PS; Stranmillis PS; Pond Park PS	48,378	22,285	10,218
Currie PS; Holy Family PS	30,814	24,228	6,812
St Patrick's Academy; Lisnagarvey HS	31,009	17,670	7,568
Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche; Castlewellan PS; Annsborough IPS	26,280	19,595	10,218
Carhill IPS; Cross Roads PS; Culcrow PS	27,723	24,174	10,218
Down HS; St Patrick's GS	40,912	20,505	7,568
St Macartan's PS; Cumran PS	23,307	14,467	8,419
St Brigid's PS; Downpatrick PS	18,200	18,837	6,812
Glengormley IPS; Mossgrove PS; Lea Green PS Behaviour Unit	30,937	24,169	11,512
Drumahoe PS; Glendermott PS	21,940	16,918	6,812
St Bernard's PS; Knockbreda PS; Knockbreda NS; St Bernard's Pre School	28,395	17,829	13,624
St Mary's PS; All Children's IPS	23,915	19,377	6,812
Sacred Heart PS; Denamona PS; St Lawrence's PS	29,106	24,946	10,218
Hill Croft School; Rosstulla School	29,073	19,358	6,812
Cavehill PS; St Therese of Lisieux PS	24,843	18,804	6,812
St. Pius X; Magherafelt High School	45,225	14,325	7,568
St. Louise's Comprehensive College; Belfast Model for girls	41,460	-	-
St. Joseph's PS; Harmony Hill PS	25,600	20,366	6,812
Round Tower Integrated PS; Parkhall PS	21,475	21,999	6,812

**Shared Education Budget by academic year - CASE**

<b>Partnership Schools</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
Donemana PS, St Michael's Ps	23,214	12,374	14,992
Gortin PS, St. Patrick's Gortin, St. Peter's Plumbridge	7,894	5,062	-
St. Joseph's Crossgar, Glasswater Crossgar	18,514	12,250	-

<b>Partnership Schools</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
St. John the Baptist College Portadown, Clounagh Junior HS	4,558	8,803	-
Carrick PS Lurgan, Ceara SS, Lurgan Model	24,513	10,168	-
Tobermore PS, St. Columba's PS Draperstown	16,114	2,421	10,171
Millquarter PS Toomebridge, Groggan PS Randalstown	8,225	11,672	19,889
St Mary's Teemore, Fairgreen NS, Belturbet	13,804	5,512	-
Hazelwood Int.PS, Woodburn OS Carrickfergus Central PS	13,810	10,603	-
St Joseph's PS Slate St, Blackmountain PS	44,069	35,869	-
St Ronan's PS Newry, Bridge IPS	73,254	54,526	63,285
Sacred Heart PS, Ballysillan PS	15,897	17,579	29,648
Newbuildings PS, St Columba's PS	20,922	18,559	-
Ballylifford PS, Coagh PS	7,330	4,621	5,048
St Francis of Assisi PS, Lisnadill PS	11,448	12,874	8,589
Ballycarrickmaddy PS, St Patrick's PS Aghacommon	5,285	3,961	4,520
Spires Int. PS, Magherafelt PS, Gaelscoil an tSeanchai, Holy Family PS	33,120	8,134	24,787
Knocknagoney PS, St Patrick's PS Holywood	36,963	36,458	47,865
Glencraig Int. PS, Holywood PS	18,267	12,733	22,363
Drumragh Int. College, St Dympna's PS	8,605	6,089	-
St Patrick's PS Annaghmore, Orchard County PS	36,936	23,767	26,334
Killyhommon PS, Derrygonnelly PS	16,282	10,417	-
Hamiltonsbawn PS, St Peter's PS Collegeland	20,697	6,584	-
Spa PS, St Francis' PS	18,563	14,745	14,616
Fairview PS, St Oliver Plunkett's PS	32,220	28,448	51,155
Toreagh PS, St John's PS Carnlough	6,119	1,501	-
St Patrick's PS Donaghmore, Donaghmore PS	10,208	5,277	-
St Joseph's Boys', Foyle College, St Patrick's & St Brigid's College, Oakgrove Int. College	11,013	2,421	-
Old Warren PS, Cranmore Int. PS	8,856	7,262	-
St Mary's PS Saintfield, Saintfield HS	4,685	4,599	-
St Mary's PS Draperstown, Money more PS	25,688	11,960	9,881
St Patrick's PS The Loup, Kilronan Special School	5,573	1,695	-
Ballykelly PS, Faughanvale PS	19,584	6,560	11,150
Ballydown PS, St Francis' PS, Aghaderg	50,443	18,640	-
Braidside Int. PS, Buick Memorial PS	17,681	15,845	-
Blythefield PS, Good Shepherd PS	8,574	9,316	-
Tor Bank School, Dundonald Primary & Nursery School, Longstone School	9,524	6,135	-
St Brigid's PS, Tirkane/Bunscoil Primary	4,724	-	-
St Ronan's PS Recarson, Gillygooley PS	13,304	12,225	9,719
St Colum's PS, Portstewart PS	16,019	17,312	17,780
St Michael's PS, Ashgrove PS	63,419	49,249	58,614
St Joseph's PS, Ballymoney Model CIPS	17,448	14,109	-
Holy Family PS Aughamullan, Stewartstown PS	4,153	8,949	-

<b>Partnership Schools</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
Our Lady Queen of Peace PS, Killowen PS, Holy Evangelists' PS	9,865	4,357	-
Drumlins IPS, Christ The King PS	16,785	10,240	21,020
Moyle PS, St MacNissis PS, Whitehead PS, Olderfleet PS	46,152	44,012	60,573
Botanic PS, Holy Rosary PS	18,316	19,665	-
Knockavoe School, St Mary's NS Castlefinn	10,224	4,768	5,277
Oakgrove Int. PS, Chapel Road PS, Culmore PS, Ashlea PS	51,772	31,333	57,124
St Mary's PS Portaferry, Portavogie PS	11,170	4,067	8,287
Abbots Cross PS, Cliftonville Int. PS	44,473	28,756	19,584
St Brigid's PS Ballymoney, Leaney PS	11,468	13,490	-
St Mary's PS Gortnaghey, St Canices PS, Drumrane PS	32,643	16,774	24,445
Gaelscoil Chluainin, St John the Baptist PS, Belleek PS	5,674	3,728	-
Mercy PS, Edenbrooke PS	28,182	37,403	42,416
Clifton School & Kilcooley PS	3,192	605	-
Kingsmills PS, St Laurence O'Toole'S PS, St Malachy's PS, Mullaglass	13,634	17,239	-
Our Lady's Girls' PS, Carr's Glen PS	17,347	9,610	9,945
Londonderry PS, St Finian's PS, Newtownards Model PS	16,251	18,046	21,109
Donaghadee PS, Killard House School	10,040	6,149	8,611
Ampertaine PS, St Patrick's PS, Glen	15,321	15,258	23,204
Saints & Scholars IPS, St Malachy's PS	24,172	14,812	-
St Patrick's PS Newtownstewart, Newtownstewart Model PS, St Eugene's PS	13,460	11,898	18,759
St Eoghan's PS Moneyneena, Damhead PS, Macosquin PS	61,012	27,729	40,608
St Ita's PS, Gilnahirk PS	5,789	-	-
St Mary's PS Cloghcor, Artigarvan PS, Bready Jubilee PS	14,967	8,803	-
St Mary's PS Mullaghbawn, Dun Dealgan NS	9,611	5,745	-
Roe Valley Int. PS, St Colmcille's PS, Limavady Central PS & St Matthew's PS	20,072	15,488	19,588
Hardy Memorial PS, St Patrick's PS Armagh	26,574	40,746	48,663
Ballougry PS, St Joseph's NS Rathmullan & Ayr Hill	4,641	1,138	-
Our Lady's PS, Killylea PS, Drumsallen PS	12,592	14,088	-
Gaelscoil Eoghain, Donaghey PS, Lissan PS	15,715	13,505	-
St Mary's PS Kircubbin, Victoria PS	31,821	6,899	21,999
Ben Madigan Preparatory School-Our Lady of Lourdes PS Park Lodge	8,457	11,370	18,835
St Patrick's & St Joseph's PS, Garvagh PS	16,672	18,999	-
Millington PS, St. Anthony's PS	34,300	29,909	-
Ballywalter PS, Portaferry Integrated PS, St Joseph's PS Stranford	14,833	14,659	-
Blessed Patrick O' Loughlin PS, Walker Memorial PS	4,828	3,374	-
Camphill PS & Mary Queen of Peace	10,206	15,141	42,319
Clough PS & Castle Tower School	13,784	7,117	22,092
Creavery PS & Creggan PS	19,374	4,261	-
Lisanally Special School & Darkley PS	10,571	678	-
St Ninnidh's PS & Darley NS	3,404	3,292	-
Drumacrutin NS & St John's PS Middletown	4,615	-	-

<b>Partnership Schools</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
Fane Street PS & St Paul's PS	10,898	14,006	9,789
Gorran PS Coleraine & St Columba's PS Coleraine	17,553	12,205	-
Holy Cross PS Girls Belfast & Wheatfield Primary School	6,531	2,203	18,790
Killowen PS Newry, Grange PS & SN San Nioclas	11,210	2,033	5,123
Limavady Grammar School, St Patrick's College, Rossmar School & Gaelcholaiste Dhoire	16,473	-	-
Nettlefield PS & St Matthews PS	7,506	4,285	31,736
Rowandale Integrated PS & Moira PS	28,530	23,765	-
St Jarlath's PS & The Cope PS	9,377	7,776	-
St Comgall's PS & Grange Park PS	20,130	17,996	38,498
St Joseph's PS Armagh Madden & Drumhillery PS	12,442	7,189	-
Our Lady's & ST Mochua's PS Derrynoose & Clontibret NS	6,836	5,492	-
St Joseph's College, Devenish College & St Fanchea's College	8,549	-	-
St Kieran's PS & Tonagh PS	7,080	3,776	19,419
St Mary's PS Pomeroy & Queen Elizabeth II PS	4,978	3,154	-
St Mary's PS Dunamore & Orritor PS	5,679	10,267	-
The Armstrong PS & Mount St Catherine's PS	5,579	1,614	-
St Malachy's Glencull, Richmond Primary School Ballygawley & St Mary's Primary School Ballygawley	14,761	5,648	-
St Colman's Bann, Milltown PS & Gilford PS	8,164	8,244	21,070
St Bernard's PS & Mossley PS	13,358	17,805	36,163
St Mary's PS Killyleagh & Killyleagh PS	12,259	6,778	10,588
Longstone PS, St Paul's PS Ahoghill & Kirkinriola PS	3,719	9,169	-
St Joseph's Bessbrook & Bessbrook PS	5,730	-	-
Knockevin PS & Scared Heart Primary School	7,775	6,069	8,631
St Patrick's Eskra, St Patrick's Aughadarragh & Monaghan Model School	7,414	7,702	-
Rosetta PS & Forge Integrated PS	24,816	-	-
St Kevin's College Lisnaskea & St Aidan's Comprehensive Cavan	6,657	8,656	-
Jones Memorial PS & Holy Trinity PS	9,458	17,752	8,287
Gracehill PS & St Mary's PS Greenlough	8,581	3,873	-
Clea PS & Ballybay Central School	2,269	629	-
Millennium IPS & Carr PS Lisburn	16,068	13,057	-
Dominican College, Dunluce School, North Coast Integrated & Coleraine College	16,291	-	-
St Joseph's Primary School Caledon & Churchill Primary School	7,181	6,162	-
Maralin Village, St Mary's Derrymore & St Patrick's Magheralin	9,187	6,822	-
Bushvalley PS, St Patrick's Glenariff & St Ciaran's PS Cushendun	4,907	2,106	23,202
Drumadonnell Ps, St Colman'sPs & St Mary's	11,065	3,510	-
St Mary's & Iveagh Ps	4,632	2,808	-
Richmount PS & St John's Eglis	7,837	2,687	-
St Aidan's & St Mogue's	3,156	7,262	-
St Columb's Cullion & Churchtown PS	5,802	8,280	-
St Mary's PS, Abercorn Ps & Donard Special School	11,577	15,832	-

<b>Partnership Schools</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
St Scire's PS & Ballyconnell Central	1,953	3,515	-
Ballytober PS & St Patrick's PS	2,701	1,114	-
St Catherine's PS & Raphoe Central NS	13,150	-	-
Kells & Connor Ps & St. Oliver Plunkett's Ps	6,583	4,401	8,382
Bloomfield PS & St Malachy's PS	6,428	-	-
Strabane Academy & Holy Cross College	-	-	4,720
Hezlett Primary School & St. Aidan's Primary School	-	-	-
St Mary's PS Saintfield, Carrickmannon PS	-	2,033	-

## Notes

### SESP

SESP funding has been supported by DE, TEO and Atlantic Philanthropies.

Funding provided to SESP partnerships in 2018/19 was provided through the SESP project. 2019/20 funding was provided by DE via the 2019/20 Shared Education Pilot project and SESP. Funding in the current academic year is being provided by DE through the Transition Phase budget and SESP

### CASE

CASE – for cross border partnerships, funding reference applies only to NI school(s)

Covid-19 has impacted on budgets allocated to partnerships in 20/21 due to lack of opportunities for pupil engagement

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education if and when he will add Sign Language to the Key Stage 1 and 2 curriculum and at GCSE.

**(AQW 18556/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Many primary and special schools already choose to teach Makaton, Irish Sign Language and British Sign Language. The curriculum provides schools with considerable flexibility to adapt what they teach and to use approaches that they consider best suit the learning needs of their pupils. Within the statutory requirements there are a range of opportunities for schools to include Sign Language within their curriculum provision.

The Area of Learning 'Language and Literacy' places value on the ways in which learning another language such as sign language can improve children's communication and literacy skills and can help them to develop cultural understanding, which is one of the key elements that underpin the Northern Ireland Curriculum objectives.

Communication is one of the three Cross-Curricular Skills, transferable across all areas of the curriculum. Children are given opportunities to engage with and demonstrate the skill of communication and to transfer their knowledge about communication concepts and skills to real-life meaningful contexts across the curriculum. Modes of effective communication include talking and listening, reading and writing and also non-verbal modes of communication.

In addition, in Personal Development and Mutual Understanding in primary schools, pupils are given the opportunity to learn about personal and social relationships, including the need for tolerance and respect for others who may use different ways to communicate. This includes the exploration and appreciation of similarities and differences between groups including those with disabilities.

The Education Authority also provide a Sensory Service who are a team of teachers with specialist qualifications in working with children and young people who are deaf/have hearing loss. The service offers support for children and young people, their families and schools from the time of diagnosis and continue this work through all stages of children's education. Referrals are usually made by health professionals. However, families and education professionals can refer to the service, if school staff have specific and identified concerns based on observation/collected evidence.

The Department for Education (England) is developing content for a potential British Sign Language (BSL) GCSE and proposes to consult on this later this year. Following a period of consultation and, if this process leads to approval of a qualification by Ofqual, then it will be available for delivery by examination centres in Northern Ireland. At this point, it is not possible to provide a timescale for when the rollout of this qualification will take place.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Education how many requests his Department received for the translation of documents into (i) Irish; and (ii) Ulster Scots, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18569/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Department of Education does not store statistics on how many requests for translations of documents have been made.



**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the scale of school refurbishment required in North Down.  
(AQW 18585/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The Education Authority delivered circa £1m of maintenance works in the North Down constituency in 2020/21 financial year. There is £910k of maintenance works planned, subject to budget availability, for 2021/22 and 2022/23.

You will also be aware that five School Enhancement Programme projects have been announced in the North Down constituency aimed at refurbishing or extending the existing school provision. These projects are at St Columbanus' College, Sullivan Upper School, Glencraig Integrated Primary School, Kilcooley Primary School and Clifton School.

**Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the post primary schools that have asked for a temporary variation; and (ii) how many additional places each school is seeking for entry in September 2021.

(AQW 18602/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Details of the post-primary schools for which Temporary Variations (TVs) have been requested for admission to the school at Year 8 in the 2021/22 school year are set out below.

**Post-primary school admissions TV requests for 2021/22 as at 14 May 2021**

School Ref	School Name	Admissions Number - Places Requested
141-0270	Wellington College	22
142-0027	The Royal Belfast Academical Institution	12
142-0029	St Dominic's GS	25
142-0030	St Malachy's College	29
142-0277	Aquinas GS	20
221-0306	Lisneal College	21
223-0138	Dean Maguirc	36
223-0322	St Kevin's College	3
226-0283	Drumragh Integrated College	28
241-0048	Limavady GS	6
242-0052	Thornhill College	11
242-0287	Lumen Christi College	24
321-0035	Magherafelt HS	6
321-0133	Ballymoney HS	1
323-1032	St Colm's HS Draperstown	7
325-0207	Parkhall Integrated College	18
326-0289	Slemish College	10
326-0299	Ulidia IC	10
341-0008	Ballyclare HS	6
341-0098	Carrickfergus GS	3
342-0010	St Louis GS, Ballymena	29
342-0011	Ballymena Academy	21
342-0012	Dalriada School	7
342-0058	Rainey Endowed	12
342-0077	Belfast High School	10
421-0296	Bangor Academy	11
421-0051	Lisnagarvey HS	20
423-0107	St Columbanus' College	5
426-0255	Lagan College	11
441-0085	Down HS	10
442-0051	Wallace HS	3

School Ref	School Name	Admissions Number - Places Requested
442-0086	Assumption GS	10
442-0088	St Patrick's GS, Downpatrick	20
442-0259	Our Lady & St Patrick's College	22
521-0025	Newtownhamilton HS	4
521-0083	Markethill HS	7
521-0097	Fivemiletown College	5
521-0127	Rathfriland HS	3
523-0135	St Mark's HS, Warrenpoint	22
523-0157	St Paul's HS, Bessbrook	14
523-0167	St Joseph's HS, Crossmaglen	9
523-0187	St Patrick's HS, Keady	9
523-0218	St Catherine's College	29
523-0321	St John the Baptist's College	4
526-0285	New-Bridge Integrated College	7
526-0286	Integrated College Dungannon	20
541-0013	Banbridge Academy	8
542-0073	St Joseph's GS, Donaghmore	49

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's definition of corporal punishment.  
(AQW 18616/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Corporal punishment in schools in Northern Ireland such as smacking, caning or shaking a child was abolished under "The Education (Corporal Punishment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1987"; the ban was extended to independent schools in June 2003, through the commencement of Article 36 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Education to outline the timescale and nature of planned maintenance works approved by the Education Authority to facilities at Ballycraigy Primary School, Antrim.  
(AQW 18620/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The Education Authority (EA) have advised that works to upgrade the remaining defective wooden-framed curtain walling at Ballycraigy Primary School (PS) will commence during summer 2021 and will be completed by September 2021.

The minor works Business Case to enable Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) to relocate to Ballycraigy PS is well advanced and will be completed in the near future.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Education to detail the average spend by his Department per pupil in (i) controlled schools; (ii) maintained schools; (iii) integrated schools; and (iv) irish-medium schools.  
(AQW 18664/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The Department is unable to provide a breakdown of the total funding per pupil for the sectors requested. Some central costs funded by the Education Authority (EA) are not disaggregated at an individual school level, such as home to school transport, the school library service, etc.

Every grant-aided school covered by the Common Funding Scheme receives a fully delegated budget for its day-to-day recurrent funding needs, distributed via the Common Funding Formula (CFF). The table below shows the 2021-22 per pupil funding distributed through the CFF for the: (i) controlled; (ii) maintained; (iii) integrated; and (iv) Irish-medium sectors.

Sector	2021-22 Per Pupil Funding distributed through the CFF £
Controlled	3,904
Maintained	3,960
Integrated <sup>1</sup>	4,395
Irish-medium <sup>2</sup>	4,183

- 1 The Irish-medium sector includes both controlled and other maintained Irish-medium schools.
- 2 The integrated education sector includes both Grant Maintained Integrated and Controlled Integrated schools. There are presently no maintained integrated schools.

The figures exclude special schools, as these schools are not funded through the CFF.

By way of comparison, when including funding for all schools and pupils from both the Aggregated Schools Budget (distributed through the CFF), the EA's block grant, and the EA's earmarked budgets for schools, the spend per pupil is £6,287 (although, as noted above, this cannot be disaggregated at a sector level). This is based on the Department's opening budget for the 2021-22 financial year, and excludes funding for non-statutory pre-school education providers participating in the Pre-School Education Programme, and opening COVID-19 funding commitments.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children with a diagnoses of Autism in (i) mainstream schools; (ii) special schools; and (iii) autism units in schools across Northern Ireland, each year for the last five years. **(AQW 18676/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** As this question covers the academic years 2016/17 to 2020/21 it would be prudent to first explain the recent changes that have taken place to the recording of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Medical Conditions in schools.

A review was undertaken in 2017/18 by my Department and the Education Authority to review current SEN categories and school guidance for recording children with SEN. The results of this review changed the definitions of SEN categories and provided definitions for medical categories to be included in a new electronic medical register in schools. These changes came into effect in January 2019.

The focus of the SEN register is to ensure that all of the SEN categories used to record a child's SEN relate to the child's learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision, and is based on the premise of need. The review highlighted a number of medical diagnosis anomalies (for example, Autism was included as a SEN category in the guidance for schools even though Autism is a medical diagnosis. While some pupils with Autism may have a SEN, some will not). Therefore, children with a medical diagnosis and no SEN were being incorrectly categorised as having a SEN when they did not have a learning need. This has been corrected with the creation of an electronic medical register, whereby children who have a medical diagnosis and no SEN, have been removed from the school's SEN register. Therefore, pupils with a medical diagnosis who do not have an associated SEN have been recorded on a school's Medical Register since 2019/20. Any pupil with a medical diagnosis who requires SEN provision, or who has been assessed in other SEN categories, have been recorded on the school's Medical Register as well as on the SEN Register since 2019/20. This has resulted in SEN Registers in schools now being more accurate.

#### **Pupils recorded as having SEN Autism 2016/17 - 2018/19**

<b>School type</b>		<b>2016/ 17</b>	<b>2017/ 18</b>	<b>2018/ 19</b>
Voluntary and Private preschool centres		108	100	99
Nursery schools		118	98	146
Primary schools (inc nursery units and reception)	Mainstream	-	2,554	3,182
	Autism Learning Support Centre	-	187	193
	Non Autism Learning Support Centre	-	220	269
	Resource Provision	-	-	-
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2,422</b>	<b>2,961</b>	<b>3,644</b>
Post primary schools	Mainstream	-	1,658	2,046
	Autism Learning Support Centre	-	65	73
	Non Autism Learning Support Centre	-	86	100
	Resource Provision	-	-	-
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1,495</b>	<b>1,809</b>	<b>2,219</b>
Special schools		1,773	2,030	2,219
<b>Total</b>		<b>5,916</b>	<b>6,998</b>	<b>8,327</b>

**Pupils recorded as having Medical Condition Autistic Spectrum Disorder 2019/20 – 2020/21**

School type		2019/ 20	2020/ 21
Voluntary and Private preschool centres		78	64
Nursery schools		89	78
Primary schools (inc nursery units and reception)	Mainstream	5,292	5,217
	Autism Learning Support Centre	218	209
	Non Autism Learning Support Centre	359	390
	Resource Provision	-	52
	<b>Total</b>	<b>5,869</b>	<b>5,868</b>
Post primary schools	Mainstream	4,682	5,412
	Autism Learning Support Centre	96	83
	Non Autism Learning Support Centre	169	193
	Resource Provision	-	62
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4,947</b>	<b>5,750</b>
Special schools		2,682	2,849
<b>Total</b>		<b>13,665</b>	<b>14,609</b>

**Source:** NI school census

**Notes:**

- 1 Type of Learning Support Centre was not collected by the Department prior to 2017/18.
- 2 The associated medical condition is 'Autistic Spectrum Disorder'(ASD), this will include pupils formerly recorded as Special Educational Need 'Asperger's', along with 'Autism'. In 2016/17, 2,306 pupils were recorded as Special Educational Need 'Asperger's', with 2,476 in 2017/18 and 2,580 in 2018/19.
- 3 Please note that not all pupils recorded as having a medical condition of ASD will have SEN. In 2019/20, 1,046 primary pupils (recorded with medical condition ASD) and 807 post primary pupils were not recorded as having SEN. In 2020/21, these figures were 1,032 and 955, respectively.
- 4 Resource Provision is defined as 'emergency interim resource provisions (i.e. learning support classes, albeit with some additional flexibility for schools to move children into some mainstream classes for periods according to their needs)'.
- 5 Resource Provision has been included in 2020/21 year. Resource provision learning support centres are a mix of general Learning Support and Autism specific.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) his plans to provide free school meals for all pupils; (ii) the yearly cost for such a scheme; and (iii) the conversations he has had with unions and relevant stakeholders regarding the benefits of free school meals for all pupils.

**(AQW 18686/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:**

- (i) 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. The eligibility criteria are largely based on receipt of qualifying welfare benefits. Whilst there are no plans to provide free school meals for all children, I have recently agreed to a review of the free school meal and uniform grant eligibility criteria with a view to implementation of any recommendations in future years subject to available resources. 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.
- (ii) All viable options will be costed as part of the review. It is however clear that as 28.4% of pupils currently are entitled to free school meals, the cost of providing free meals to all pupils would represent a significant increase in the funding required. Increased demand is likely to result also in capital costs to extend the capacity in school meals accommodation.
- (iii) In developing options and making recommendations for the review of free school meals and uniform grants, the review team will consult widely with relevant stakeholders including trade unions.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education whether he will deliver a Childcare Strategy before the end of this Assembly mandate.

**(AQW 18695/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** I am committed to moving forward with work on the Executive Childcare Strategy as quickly as possible, and while it remains my objective to make as much progress as I can within the current Assembly mandate, you will appreciate that Departmental resources will be stretched across a number of key priorities during this period. My Department is still heavily involved in developing and delivering Covid related support schemes for the Childcare sector and this continues to require significant staff time. However, we have begun to scope out the work required to progress the Executive Childcare Strategy. It will include assessing the state of the sector following the pandemic; re-engaging with key stakeholders on the objectives, priorities and key deliverables; feasibility testing, costing and prioritising options; and public consultation. It will also require Executive agreement on a range of significant policy decisions, including the overall budget.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education how many different versions of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) are in operation across schools.

**(AQW 18810/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** All pupils of compulsory school age follow a mandatory Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum across respective Key Stages. RSE is part of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding in primary school and the Personal Development element of Learning for Life and Work in post primary school and the minimum content that must be taught is set out in legislation.

As is the case for all areas of learning within the curriculum, it is the responsibility of the Board of Governors of each school to ensure that a comprehensive programme is delivered. The policy should be developed in consultation with governors and parents.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Education to detail the ways in which he is working with communities and individuals in order to engage young people in youth services.

**(AQW 18822/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The provision of youth services is an operational matter for the Education Authority (EA) and is based on the assessed needs of children and young people at regional and local level. In line with my Department's youth policy 'Priorities for Youth – Improving Youth People's Lives through Youth Work', inclusion, participation and collaborative working are central to their approach.

The EA consults directly with children and young people, their parents/guardians and other key community stakeholders in identifying need and in the design and development of responsive services. (The current three year Regional Assessment of Needs (RAoN) and Local Assessments of Need can be accessed via the EA's website through the following links – <https://eanifunding.org.uk/home/publications-and-resources/regional-assessment-of-need/> and <https://eanifunding.org.uk/local-assessment-of-need/>).

Youth service staff also work in partnership with a range of bodies to increase the appeal of youth services to a greater number of children and young people, promote youth services within local communities and provide advice, guidance and support on ways to engage with, and advocate for, children and young people. This includes the Regional Advisory Group (a partnership with my Department and regional voluntary youth groups), Local Advisory Groups (which include council, police, education, young people and other community and voluntary representatives), Civic Forums, Policing Community Safety Partnerships, Vulnerable People Hubs and Neighbourhood Renewal Area fora.

In addition the EA's New Funding Scheme has enabled funding to be delivered to a range of local and regional voluntary groups to engage with and introduce children and young people to youth services, including in areas where they may not previously have been available.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of how youth services, including outdoor recreation facilities, youth clubs and other initiatives can be used to keep young people away from crime and antisocial activity.

**(AQW 18823/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Youth services, delivered by the Education Authority in conjunction with the voluntary and community sectors, support the personal and social development of children and young people. The range of provision includes generic services that assist in limiting the need for early intervention or targeted support, detached/outreach youth work that promotes safety and stability and targeted initiatives aimed at young people who may not avail of traditional youth services or that require additional supports and interventions. All of these are based on assessed need and reflect not only the more generic needs of children and young people but also the specific needs of identified groups, including those at risk of getting involved in antisocial activity and criminality.

Such targeted initiatives include:

- the START programme that works with young people who have been harmed by paramilitary groups and/or those who are most at risk of becoming involved in paramilitary activity;
- SYTES programme and Youth Volunteer Academy that promotes lawfulness and prevents radicalisation of young people in local communities;

- RAPID response service that provides diversionary activities and support to the most vulnerable young people aged 14-25 engaged in, or on the fringe of, anti-community and anti-social behaviour in identified flashpoint areas across Northern Ireland;
- Planned Interventions aimed at young people in interface areas and areas where there is the potential of heightened social unrest during the summer period.
- TBUC Camps programme to provide opportunities for young people aged 11-19 across Northern Ireland to come together to build positive relationships.

Services are delivered through a range of youth facilities including youth clubs and outdoor learning centres. The latter provide young people with the opportunity to participate in adventure activities that are exciting and engaging and which provide a sense of achievement in a managed environment. They can also create in a positive way, the risk/reward context which young people have stated they associate with anti-community behaviours and crime. Outdoor learning is an integral part of the youth service programme.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether a child with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder would be eligible for a statement of Special Educational Needs.

**(AQW 18873/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Education Authority (EA) has advised that a child with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) may be eligible for a statement of special educational needs (SEN).

While the needs of most children and young people can be met by their school or nursery, and/or with the help of outside specialists, where a child with FASD presents with needs which cannot be met at the school based stages of the SEN Code of Practice, then the EA will carry out a statutory assessment which may lead to the issue of a statement.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education for the rationale used to exclude year 11 from consideration for COVID-19 protection measures provided for Years 12, 13 and 14.

**(AQW 18900/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** My Department works closely with the Department of Health (DoH), the Education Authority (EA) and the Public Health Agency (PHA). This engagement has continued throughout the pandemic to maintain the education of children, to reduce the risk of outbreaks, and to respond when these occur.

I accepted a proposal from the PHA to introduce Lateral Flow Device (LFD) testing in schools for pupils in Years 12-14 following the lifting of restrictions by the Executive. This added an additional mitigation measure in post-primary schools, thereby allowing them to further reduce the potential of infections by identifying cases at an early stage.

At the time, the Regulator had only cleared the use of LFD tests for people aged 16 and over. Therefore, in order to expedite the introduction of the additional mitigation, it was agreed that testing should be introduced to Years 12-14 initially. This excluded Year 11 pupils at the time of the introduction of the LFD due to it not being sanctioned for use on persons under the age of 16.

This roll out of testing took account of the views of a number of school principals across the educational sector via the Education Practitioners Group and the views of the various Trade Union bodies, as well as colleagues from the EA and the PHA.

Discussions are ongoing on the further potential roll out of testing, but any decisions will be based on the current medical and scientific advice available.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education to set out the role, responsibilities and rulings of the EA Curriculum Complaints Tribunal.

**(AQW 18906/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Article 25 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 places a duty on the Education Authority (EA) to appoint, in accordance with regulations made by the Department, a panel to hear and determine any complaint that the EA or the Board of Governors of a grant-aided school has acted or is proposing to act unreasonably with respect to the exercise of any power conferred or the performance of any duty imposed on it or has failed to discharge any such duty.

I expect that in the vast majority of cases, the concerns of parents will be addressed through the school's own complaints process, with complaints regarding the provision of the curriculum or other matters only proceeding to a Complaints Tribunal where the school's complaints procedures do not lead to a satisfactory outcome. Where this is the case the complainant should set out their complaint in writing to the EA which will set up a hearing.

Each tribunal will consist of three members drawn from a panel of eligible persons – that is people with experience in education and parents of registered pupils at a school.

The complainant may make an oral presentation to the tribunal to support their written complaint and may choose to be accompanied by a friend or representative. The respondent may also nominate a representative to make an oral presentation. The chairperson of the tribunal will determine the order of the oral presentations.

When the complaint has been fully considered the tribunal will notify all parties of its determination in writing, giving an explanation of its conclusions, details of any requirements placed on the respondent to take particular actions to resolve the complaint and details of any further recourse available.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education (i) whether or not CCEA has required schools or colleges to take into account, or in any way consider, previous centre performance in GCSE or A-Level assessments for 2021, and (ii) how are centres being asked to use this data in their assessments.

**(AQW 18907/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Centres have been asked to use a range of evidence to arrive at a professional and academic judgement of the standard at which each student is performing in the context of the specification for which they entered and from this provide a grade to CCEA. The evidence used to inform Centre Determined Grades does not include prior attainment data.

As part of the process, schools are expected to compare subject cohort outcomes with those of previous years and satisfy themselves that any significant changes can be justified with evidence. Historical outcomes are not, therefore, a barrier to either an increase or decrease in grade outcomes this year and will not play any part in decisions taken by CCEA in the review and acceptance of grades from centres.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education to outline whether he met with trade union bodies before making a decision around the return of CCEA public examinations.

**(AQW 18951/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** As part of the engagement process officials met with a range of stakeholders, including trade unions.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils with special educational needs in North Down.

**(AQW 19008/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** In 2020/21, there were 2,783 pupils with Special Educational Needs enrolled in schools located in the North Down Constituency.

**Source:** NI school census

**Notes:**

Figures include funded pupils in voluntary and private pre-schools, nursery schools, primary (including nursery classes, reception and year 1-7 classes), post-primary and special schools.

Figures include pupils at stages 1 – 5 on the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice.

Constituency relates to the address of the school.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education how many complaints has his Department received from individual teachers, or their unions, in relation to Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998, in each year since 2016.

**(AQW 19094/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The information requested is as follows:

Year	No of complaints received from individual Teachers	No of complaints received from individual Teaching Unions
2016	0	0
2017	0	0
2018	0	0
2019	0	0
2020	0	0
2021	1	0

## Department of Finance

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance to quantify the precise amount of funding provided for the Translation Hub, as referred to in his statement to the Assembly on 27 April 2021; and the total anticipated spend of the Hub in 2021/22.

**(AQW 18044/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** The Executive agreed to provide the Department for Communities with £160,000 of funding for the anticipated staffing costs of the Translation Hub.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the proposal from victims' campaigner Peter Heathwood that there should be a wall in the grounds of Stormont containing the name of every person who died in the Troubles.

**(AQW 18070/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Should I receive such a proposal I would give it full consideration. Given the sensitivities involved, I would suggest that such a proposal is discussed with all parties represented in the Assembly and that a consensus is found. For information I have attached the Department's existing policy on commemorative structures or planting on the grounds of the Stormont Estate.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance why boarding kennels have not been eligible for COVID-19 rates relief; and what assistance will be made available.

**(AQW 18164/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** In 2020-21 all boarding kennels here received 4 months (33%) rates relief through Covid-19 funding. In addition, almost all dog kennel businesses also received further rate relief support from my Department's long standing Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) scheme, which automatically applies a minimum of 20% and a maximum of 50% rate relief to rate bills of small businesses here with Net Annual Values (NAV) up to £15,000.

Many dog kennel businesses also received the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant and shortly will receive, without application, a further £5,000 of support through the Coronavirus Financial Assistance (Business Support) Scheme 2021, which my Department provided from the £178m of remaining unallocated Covid-19 funding in respect of the 2020-21 financial year.

With regard to the 2021-22 rating year, assistance from my Department will continue to be provided through the SBRR. I have also implemented a freeze in the non-domestic Regional Rates and I have also delayed the issuing of this year's bills until June which will assist businesses as we continue to make progress on our pathway to recovery. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs are the policy competent department and the regulatory authority for the boarding kennel sector; I have sought advice as to what support is forthcoming from that Department. However, I have not as yet received a response.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has to bring forward legislation to deal with estate rent charges and regulate property management companies in this area, and to give freeholders on private and mixed-tenure estates equivalent rights to leaseholders to challenge the reasonableness of estate rent charges.

**(AQW 18702/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** ANSWER

My Department has undertaken preliminary work in the development of legislation around shared property management, including registration of such companies and codes of conduct.

There is insufficient time left in the course of this mandate to further develop and finalise a Bill and take it through the various stages in the Assembly, but further work is planned that will permit an incoming Executive to consider this issue next year.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 17498/17-22, where is the extant legislative authority to establish these bodies.

**(AQW 18704/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** As indicated in AQW 17498/17-22 the preparatory work in relation to both bodies, including their establishment, has been taken forward and funded under the existing authority of the Budget Act consistent with the general ambit of the Department of Finance.

As their initial work now progresses, both organisations will be separately identified in the detail of the Department's ambit in the forthcoming Budget (No 2) Bill.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department holds key performance indicators for Economic Appraisals approved for capital spending proposals from (i) Departments; (ii) arms-length bodies; and (iii) other public bodies, specifically with regards to timescales for turnaround.

**(AQW 18717/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** All business cases submitted for approval come from the relevant department, including those where the proposal originates from an arms-length body.

The Department of Finance has a target turnaround time of 20 working days for responding to submissions of business cases. This can be either to seek further clarification around issues raised in reviewing the business case or with an approval decision.

During 2020/21; 90% of responses were provided to departments within this timescale, with an average turnaround time of just over 10 working days.



The time taken for an expenditure proposal to be approved can depend on the quality of information contained within the business case, as well as the timeliness of departments in responding to any queries raised.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance how many Economic Appraisals his Department has reviewed in each of the past five financial years broken down by (i) Departments; (ii) arms-length bodies; and (iii) other public bodies.

**(AQW 18718/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Economic appraisals (also referred to as business cases) are submitted by departments to DoF's Supply Division by way of seeking DoF approval for expenditure decision which are outside the department's delegated authority. Economic appraisals for expenditure decisions below departments' delegated limits are not submitted to DoF.

Irrespective of whether the case originates from an Arms Length Body or the core department; it is submitted to DoF by the department, as the Departmental Accounting Officer must be satisfied with the case before it is submitted to DoF.

The breakdown of the number of economic appraisals which DoF have been submitted to DoF to be reviewed in each of the past five years is set out in the table below, based on the information provided by departments at the time they were submitted:

Department	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
<b>DAERA</b>					
Dept.	11	7	2	5	5
Arms Length Bodies	3	2	11	7	8
<b>Communities</b>					
Dept.	20	12	20	13	22
Arms Length Bodies	11	12	22	11	13
<b>Economy</b>					
Dept.	14	11	6	8	12
Arms Length Bodies	15	8	14	9	9
<b>Education</b>					
Dept.	13	11	12	12	35
Arms Length Bodies	18	7	10	9	10
<b>Finance</b>					
Dept.	15	19	14	12	21
Arms Length Bodies	10	3	6	6	7
<b>Health</b>					
Dept.	2	2	2	14	5
Arms Length Bodies	31	21	19	13	21
<b>Infrastructure</b>					
Dept.	23	5	11	9	13
Arms Length Bodies	12	20	17	33	32
<b>Justice</b>					
DoJ – Dept.	8	1	0	2	1
Arms Length Bodies	13	22	25	18	12
<b>TEO</b>					
Dept.	10	11	13	13	13
Arms Length Bodies	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Other Bodies</b>					
FSA	1	0	0	0	0
NIAUR	2	0	0	0	0
PPS	0	0	1	0	0

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the potential of Airport Passenger Duty being removed for Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18731/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Air Passenger Duty (APD) on direct long haul flights departing from airports in the North was devolved and eliminated by the Executive in 2013, however the responsibility for short haul APD rests with the Treasury. As such, it is currently an Excepted Matter and outside of the Executive's control.

However, the removal of short haul APD is something I have previously called on the Treasury to take action on. It is an unfair tax which is a barrier to recovery and that disproportionately disadvantages citizens in the North compared to others on these islands. This is a point I will be re-iterating to the Treasury in the context of their ongoing consultation on aviation tax reform.

I also expect that the Fiscal Commission will consider the merits and implications of the increased devolution in respect of APD as it takes forward its work.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has pledged to make the necessary funding available to help repair the damage caused by the recent fires in the Mourne mountains.

**(AQW 18765/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** I recently visited the Mournes and saw at first hand the damage caused by the fires; I also met with the National Trust to understand the work that is needed to bring about recovery and restoration. I believe that; as an Executive, we should commit to supporting this work. I have therefore written to Ministerial colleagues with a view to forming a cross-departmental group to consider the immediate funding requirements as well as the longer term strategy for the site. This work needs to be progressed as quickly as possible and will have my full support.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 18105/17-22 and responses to questions following his statement to the Assembly on 27 April 2021, whether he was aware of bids made by the Department for the Economy to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18770/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** In Autumn 2020; NIO requested that DoF coordinate bids from the Executive for £40 million of Unique Circumstances funding to be administered by NIO as part of the New Decade New Approach Financial package.

The Department for the Economy submitted a bid for £500k to mark the centenary in this exercise. However; subsequent to the NIO request and prior to bids being submitted, the NIO clarified its position in a letter to First Minister (FM) and deputy First Minister (dFM) and set out its assessment of how that £40 million funding was to be allocated, including £3 million of centenary funding which was to be administered by the NIO. As the letter from NIO superseded the earlier request; no bids were provided to NIO.

The Department for the Economy submitted a bid of £4.73m for Tourism Major Events Hosting in the 2021-22 budget return and the narrative accompanying the bid indicated that funding was to be used for events such as The Open Championship; Irish Open, ISP Handa World Invitational, World Rally Championship, Fleadh Cheoil and Tall Ships. In this narrative DfE also indicated that it was considering a programme to support the promotion of the North in its centenary year but a specific bid for a centenary celebration was not submitted.

As I have stated previously; no centenary funding bids were submitted to DoF in relation to the Executive's Budget process, or for Executive funding for the 2021-22 year.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to write-off debts accrued in situations where applicants received overpayments under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme as a result of an error made by Land and Property Services.

**(AQW 18790/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** There are no plans to write-off any debt due to overpayments under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

Because this Scheme was developed at great pace to provide support to businesses required to close or severely curtail their services by the Health Protection restrictions, and because the restrictions evolved rapidly adding to the complexity of the scheme, it was recognised from the outset that there was a risk of errors in the administration of LRSS payments. Therefore, it was always the intention that Land & Property Services (LPS) would carry out a review of each applicant's eligibility under the Scheme to ensure each was paid correctly and identify cases where payments were made contrary to the Regulations. Such post event assurance action in Covid-19 grant schemes was recommended by the Northern Ireland Audit Office last September.

Once it has been identified that payments have been made contrary to the Regulations LPS must seek to recoup those payments.

The published information on the Scheme states that any payments made contrary to the Regulations will have to be repaid. This condition was clearly stipulated and had to be accepted by applicants during the application process.

It is recognised that repaying monies paid in error may present a significant financial challenge to some businesses. LPS will work with businesses to put in place an arrangement for repayment over an agreed period of time.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance how applicants to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme that were overpaid as a result of administrative error were notified of the overpayment; and how quickly they were notified after the error was discovered.

**(AQW 18791/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Work to review the eligibility of all Localised Restriction Support Scheme applications has been ongoing between late January and early May 2021. Land & Property Services put applications on hold as soon as a possible overpayment was identified to ensure that no further payments, which could increase the level of overpayment, were issued. Applicants identified as having received an overpayment were informed by email on either 31 March or 14 May 2021.

The date when a possible overpayment was identified and the date on which the applicant was informed of the possible overpayment will be different in each case. Land & Property Services is unable to provide a complete breakdown regarding how quickly each applicant was informed.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance how many businesses that applied to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme were initially overpaid as a result of being assigned the incorrect level of support; and how many were the result of errors by staff administering the scheme.

**(AQW 18794/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Of the 654 applicants currently in an overpayment situation, 400 of these relate to applicants who have now been determined to have no eligibility for payment under the Scheme and 254 relate to applicants who are eligible but have been overpaid.

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. As result there are various reasons that led to overpayments under Localised Restrictions Support Scheme. Land & Property Service has not done any analysis of the overpayment situation to determine the number caused by applicant error or by administration error, so I am unable to provide you with a breakdown.

The review and validation of all LRSS applications will continue to be an essential part of administration of this scheme to ensure the scheme is being administered in line with the associated regulations. 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 Allister** asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 18105/17-22, why the bid for funding to mark the Centenary of Northern Ireland from the Department of the Economy was declined.

**(AQW 18838/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** In Autumn 2020, NIO requested that DoF coordinate bids from the Executive for £40 million of Unique Circumstances funding administered by NIO as part of the New Decade New Approach financial package.

The Department for the Economy prepared bids for Centenary Funding and provided this to DoF however, subsequent to the NIO request and prior to bids being submitted to NIO or the NDNA Joint Board, the NIO clarified its position on the Unique Circumstances funding in a letter to FM and dFM.

This letter set out its assessment of how the £40 million funding was to be allocated, including £3 million of centenary funding which was to be administered by the NIO.

As the letter from NIO superseded the earlier request, no bids were forwarded to NIO.

As I have stated previously, no Centenary funding bids were submitted to DoF in relation to the Executive's Budget process or for Executive funding for the 2021-22 year. Departments have scope to reallocate funding for this purpose should they wish.

**Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the review of Arm's-Length Bodies.

**(AQW 18843/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** At its meeting on the 18 June 2020, the Executive agreed to a review of Arm's Length Bodies, in accordance with the requirements set out in the New Decade New Approach (NDNA) document. On 4th May 2021 I circulated a draft Executive paper recommending that legislation is enacted which enables Ministers to reform their ALBs. It is now for the Executive to decide whether to enact this reforming legislation or to maintain the status quo.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the review of business rates.

**(AQW 18876/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The context of the Review of Business Rates undertaken in 2019 was completely different to that now faced by our economy and business community as we emerge from the pandemic. The Review did, however, provide some important insights and I am pleased that significant progress has been made in respect of many of the issues highlighted during the public consultation.

Firstly, the overall high level of business rates and the balance of business rates to domestic rates were issues raised during the public consultation. In response, I reduced the regional business rate by 18% for 2020-21 and, in addition to this, I held this rate at the reduced amount for 2021-22. I also froze the domestic rate for the last two years. I extended the Small Business Rate Relief scheme and restored the Rural ATM Relief Scheme in response to feedback received during the consultation. Finally, I also made two changes that had been sought to assist District Councils in relation to District Rates.

The unprecedented level of COVID-funded additional rate relief of £288 million in 2020-21 and £230 million in 2021-22, which was provided after I received independent expert advice from the Ulster University, has superseded the need for further immediate review. However, I am keeping the matter of business rates and the economic recovery under close scrutiny as we move forward in this business year.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Finance, given the closure of PEACE IV funding in 2020 and the opening of the PEACE PLUS programme later this year, to outline the assistance he can provide to community groups that face a gap in funding.  
**(AQO 2055/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Due to the COVID pandemic, many PEACE IV projects now have the opportunity to continue spending into 2023. A number of project partners are taking the opportunity to extend project end dates in order to complete planned activity which was placed on hold during lockdown. This is being facilitated where possible.

The new PEACE PLUS programme is not however a continuation of the current PEACE IV programme and some projects will end as originally planned. There is therefore no mechanism to provide gap funding to projects in anticipation of them receiving future support under the new programme. Each programme has its own unique objectives and priorities and separate applications will need to be made to the new programme.

I am hopeful that the new PEACE PLUS programme will open for project calls towards the end of this year, therefore PEACE IV & PEACE PLUS will overlap in delivery throughout 2022 and 2023, which may keep gaps in funding to a minimum.

My officials will work closely with SEUPB and all Accountable Departments to ensure as smooth a transition as possible into PEACE PLUS. For those projects that may have already or are due to conclude activity this year, I would encourage them to raise their concerns immediately with SEUPB and continue engaging with them in the event of any Programme slippage becoming available.

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the New Decade, New Approach commitment to review arm's-length bodies.  
**(AQO 2056/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** At its meeting on the 18 June 2020, the Executive agreed to a review of Arm's Length Bodies, in accordance with the requirements set out in the New Decade New Approach (NDNA) document. On 4 May 2021 I circulated a draft Executive paper recommending that legislation is enacted which enables Ministers to reform their ALBs. It is now for the Executive to decide whether to enact this reforming legislation or to maintain the status quo.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the rationale behind the pay offer made to Civil Service staff for 2020-21.  
**(AQO 2057/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The pay offer agreed by the Executive represents a 4.8% increase on the civil service pay bill over two years at a cost of £44 million. The rationale for this pay offer is that it is the most that can be afforded in the context of a standstill budget from the British Government. Importantly, it departs from the British Chancellor's pay freeze for civil servants in England next year, which I believe is unfair to public sector workers.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the bids submitted by the Minister for Infrastructure for increased funding for road resurfacing programmes.  
**(AQO 2058/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The bid submitted by the Department for Infrastructure for 2021-22 as part of the Executive's Budget process, for Roads Structural Maintenance, which is the term used for the resurfacing programme, totalled £120 million, of which £75 million was identified as inescapable, and the remaining £45 million as high priority.

In its 2021-22 Final Budget, the Executive allocated a record £722.5 million Capital to the Department for Infrastructure. This was sufficient to cover all of DfI's inescapable capital commitments and provide a significant amount for capital expenditure identified by DfI as high priority. It is now for the Infrastructure Minister to decide on how to prioritise this within her Department's business areas, including road resurfacing.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme, including the backlog of payments.  
**(AQO 2059/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The department has received 24,321 applications for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme. 15,321 applications have been successful and over £306 million has been paid to successful applicants.

9,076 businesses in the close contact, retail and outdoor activity sectors have received payments covering them up to the date that they were permitted to re-open.

A further 4,688 businesses in the tourism, hospitality and indoor activity sectors have received payments covering the period up to the 12 May 2021. Following the Executive's decision on Thursday 13 May 2021 that all remaining businesses can re-open on 24 May 2021, my department will be issuing the final payment to those businesses this week.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will provide any additional funding to offset income tax and other contributions related to COVID-19 recognition payments.

**(AQO 2060/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** I wrote to the Treasury asking that the recognition payments were not subject to income tax or other Government deductions. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury responded, advising that he didn't believe there was a case for granting an exception in relation to this payment.

Subsequently the Department of Health sought and received an additional allocation of £25m in February 2021 to mitigate the impact of income tax and other contributions related to the Healthcare Workers recognition payment.

My Department has not received any further bids for additional funding from the Department of Health related to this measure. Similarly, there have been no further bids received in relation to the Department for Communities acknowledgement payment to Supporting People staff. Should a bid be made, it would be for the Executive to agree any additional allocation.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Finance to advise whether (i) any Departments have experienced attempted cyber or ransomware attacks; and (ii) whether she has had any discussions with the Dublin or UK Governments to help prevent such attacks.

**(AQW 19033/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:**

- (i) Assessments provided by the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) highlight the government sector as being an attractive target for malicious cyber actors. Many organisations including NICS Departments regularly experience attempted cyber attacks and we continue to enhance our defences and security operations.
- (ii) NICS Department of Finance has excellent collaborative arrangements in place with the NCSC, Cabinet Office, Irish officials, NCSC and Devolved Administrations, aimed at increasing cyber resilience and preventing successful cyber attacks.

## Department of Health

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Health when the surgical Peritoneal Dialysis catheter insertion programme will recommence.

**(AQW 6734/17-22)**

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** As we emerge from the latest wave of the pandemic, the focus of our health service will continue to be on resetting all elective services in an environment that is safe for both staff and patients.

The surgical peritoneal dialysis catheter insertion programme is a regional service performed in the renal unit at Belfast City Hospital. Currently there are no dedicated elective general anaesthetic surgical lists for renal access surgery. However in the past year the Belfast Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust has availed of surgical lists in seven different Independent Sector and HSC Trust hospitals, including Tyrone County Hospital, to operate on renal failure patients requiring renal access procedures. As of 19 March 2021 there have been 118 arteriovenous (AV) fistulae created and 39 peritoneal dialysis catheters inserted by Belfast Trust surgeons.

However, COVID-19 remains a very real threat. It is no easy task to rebuild services back to pre-existing levels and this must be balanced against the need to maintain capacity to deal with COVID-19 cases. HSC Trusts are responsible for operational decisions about how and when normal service will resume, and any decisions must be taken in the context of the numbers of infections prevalent at the time.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Health (i) how many prisoners have been diagnosed with a mental illness or mental health condition, in each of the last ten years; and (ii) how many prisoners diagnosed with a mental illness or mental health condition have spent time in Care and Supervision Units within the Northern Ireland Prison Service, in each year.

**(AQW 8773/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Information on (i) the number of prisoners diagnosed with a mental illness or mental health condition, and (ii) the number of prisoners diagnosed with a mental illness or mental health condition have spent time in Care and Supervision Units is not available.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of Health and Social Care workers with a positive COVID-19 test result, for each month since February 2020.

**(AQW 10811/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Information on the number of HSC Trust workers who tested positive for COVID-19 each month from February 2020, was provided by each Health and Social Care Trust, and is detailed in the table overleaf.

**Number of HSC Trust workers who tested positive for COVID-19 by HSC Trust**

Month/Year	Number of HSC Trust Workers Tested Positive				
	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western
February 2020	-	-	-	-	-
March 2020	-	12	-	34	13
April 2020	50	95	-	205	104
May 2020	57	67	-	91	5
June 2020	8	2	16	2	1
July 2020	1	5	2	3	2
August 2020	18	7	10	25	-
September 2020	49	32	48	89	31
October 2020	370	189	224	279	196
November 2020	239	180	168	252	155
December 2020	220	357	207	398	116
January 2021	211	469	166	491	115
February 2021	-	63	46	-	-

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health, in relation to the work of the Chief Nursing Officer on the banding issue around bands five and six, whether a budget has been set aside to enable an uplift in pay for intensive care unit nurses backdated to the beginning of the current financial year.

**(AQW 11644/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** This interim uplift will apply for the period 1st October 2020 until 31st March 2021 and will be met from within existing budget allocations.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health why the Health and Social Care workforce appeal is no longer accepting expressions of interest for contact tracing.

**(AQW 12739/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Public Health Agency (PHA) has advised that the Contact Tracing Service has a sufficient staff complement to deal with their current workload. They have a contingency plan in place which would involve the redeployment of a large number of PHA staff who have been trained as contact tracers to meet any future sudden increase in demand. PHA has advised that it does not therefore currently need access to the Health and Social Care Workforce Appeal to recruit additional contact tracing staff.

**Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Health what critical threshold is being used for the PCR swab tests; and how this complies with best practice and standards.

**(AQW 14008/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Each laboratory test will have recommendations from the manufacturer specifically around how a test should be run and a guide to interpretation. However, it is best and standard practice to assess locally the exact performance of all tests. This includes establishing a cut off cycle threshold for PCR tests that contribute to the interpretation of a result as positive or negative. Each PCR test, be it for bacteria, virus or fungi, will undergo rigorous local assessment to establish individual cut off threshold cycle and limit of detection.

For SARS-CoV-2 testing, there are multiple platforms and kits in use in Northern Ireland; each one of those has been assessed individually with its own cycle threshold cut off. No one cut off cycle threshold can be applied to multiple systems.

From a laboratory perspective the Ct (cycle threshold) value is only one of a number of criteria that is considered when interpreting test results. Other criteria may include, for example, multiple SARS-CoV-2 gene targets detection, fluorescence levels, sigmoidal shape of amplification curves, and confirmatory testing using assays with alternative specificity profiles,

where required. This is in line with good laboratory practice and the World Health Organisation (WHO) papers on PCR testing for SARS-CoV-2 detection.

**Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Health what plans for restrictions are being considered for autumn 2021 and winter 2021/22.

**(AQW 14602/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions, was published on 2 March 2021 and easements on a range of areas have been announced since then.

The Executive has committed to a four-week review cycle, where we monitor the data on a range of health and societal impacts, before considering what relaxations can be made safely. While the Executive formally reviews and make decisions on restrictions every four weeks, our monitoring cycle provides us with the ability to move more rapidly on emerging priorities should the need arise before the next review point.

Decisions for autumn and winter will be taken on the basis of the scientific information available at the time.

**Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Health what is the estimated R rate for the return of click and collect services for all businesses.

**(AQW 15072/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** On 15 April 2021 the Executive agreed that from 30 April all retail businesses were permitted to reopen. Any businesses that are permitted to reopen are subject to the requirement to operate safely and to follow health and safety law and guidance and to take measures to keep staff and customers safe.

On 2 March 2021 the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

In this new process, the management of the changes to the restrictions regulations moved to the Executive Office (TEO).

TEO will now hold the lead responsibility and operational management of the process leading to Executive decisions on the ongoing need for restrictions and the requirement to amend the regulations.

This responsibility includes receiving and managing all proposals from Executive departments, management of the decision making process and facilitating consultation with departments on the drafting of amendment regulations. This work is supported by a Cross-Departmental Working Group, chaired by the Director of the TEO COVID-19 Taskforce team with membership from all 9 Departments and key stakeholders, including local government and PSNI.

The Executive, when making decisions on restrictions, takes into account the scientific and medical evidence and also the impacts of the restrictions on the economy and society. The Executive weighs up the totality of the effect each restriction can have in combination with other restrictions in reducing the rate of infections of COVID-19. It is not always possible to disaggregate the precise impact on the rate of transmission of the virus in the community for each of the individual restrictions on their own.

Scientific evidence used by the Executive for decision making purposes is now publically available: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail the criteria and scientific rationale for businesses to remain open to the public for (i) normal, in-store shopping; and (ii) click and collect shopping.

**(AQW 15129/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** On 15 April 2021 the Executive agreed that from 30 April all retail businesses were permitted to reopen. Any businesses that are permitted to reopen are subject to the requirement to operate safely and to follow health and safety law and guidance and to take measures to keep staff and customers safe.

On 2 March 2021 the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

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Scientific evidence used by the Executive for decision making purposes is now publically available: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is considering future investment to improve facilities capacity for GP services in Ballyclare, due to the growth in local population.  
(AQW 15232/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The Department is not currently considering any future investment in the facilities capacity for GP services in Ballyclare.

In terms of delivery of GP services, Ballyclare Group Practice is one of the largest Practices in Northern Ireland, offering a large range of enhanced services to its registered patients. The Health and Social Care Board has confirmed that is not aware of any particular issues with the current delivery of GP services in Ballyclare.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health to detail the rationale for the absence of definitive dates in the COVID-19 exit and recovery plan.  
(AQW 15693/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions', was published on 2 March 2021 and easements on a range of areas have been announced since then.

We are moving in the right direction and it is important to bring optimism and certainty to this improving picture and the Executive understands the call for more dates and certainty.

We also must not lose sight of the fact that the virus is still a threat. We need to be sure that we are keeping the Rt number below 1; that there is capacity in the health service; that the vaccination programme remains on track; that our Test, Trace and Protect strategy continues to be effective and that there is good adherence to the public health advice.

The Executive has committed to a four-week review cycle, where we monitor the data on a range of health and societal impacts, before considering what relaxations can be made safely. While the Executive formally reviews and make decisions on restrictions every four weeks, our monitoring cycle provides us with the ability to move more rapidly on emerging priorities should the need arise before the next review point.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health how much funding has been provided to GP practices for in-house counselling services in each of the last five years, broken down by constituency.  
(AQW 15832/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** A NI Local Enhanced Service is in place for the provision of practice based counsellors. This service enables the employment of practice-based counsellors to provide counselling for patients with mild to moderate depression.

The details of this provision is not readily available broken down by constituency; however the table below provides a breakdown at LCG level. The table sets out the practice budgets for Mild to Moderate Depression for the five years from 2016/2017 to 2020/21 for GP practices.

**Table 1: MMD Practice Budgets by Year**

LCG	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021
Belfast	£349,950.00	£378,712.00	£309,158.00	£334,475.00	£310,182.00
South Eastern	£261,091.00	£302,661.00	£273,530.00	£291,370.00	£279,097.50
Northern	£680,170.00	£663,765.00	£668,610.00	£751,752.50	£714,153.00
Southern	£185,913.26	£247,172.00	£253,202.50	£316,710.00	£281,575.00
Western	£254,150.00	£261,758.00	£261,205.00	£325,890.00	£303,481.50
<b>Totals</b>	<b>£1,731,274.26</b>	<b>£1,854,068.00</b>	<b>£1,765,705.50</b>	<b>£2,020,197.50</b>	<b>£1,888,489.00</b>

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 15095/17-22, whether he has given consideration to prioritising the vaccination of school staff involved with the education and care of pupils with special educational needs, or a statement, who attend mainstream primary and post-primary schools; and to detail a timeline on when such vaccinations will begin.  
(AQW 15871/17-22)



**Mr Swann:** The member will be aware that, whilst I acknowledge the anxieties of staff, parents and carers for children and young people who attend special schools, JCVI has not recommended prioritisation by occupation.

Therefore, staff in mainstream schools will be vaccinated in line with their age or clinical cohort.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health whether Equality Screening has been conducted into the proposed prioritisation and delivery methods of the mass general population vaccination programme envisaged for summer 2021 under Phase 4 of the Covid-19 Vaccination Programme Phased Plan.

**(AQW 16154/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The member can be assured that Equality screening was conducted before the proposed prioritisation and delivery methods of the mass general population vaccination programme envisaged for summer 2021 under Phase 4 of the Covid-19 Vaccination Programme Phased Plan.

PHA have established a dedicated team to identify areas of low uptake, potential reasons for this and to assist the programme in targeting areas of low uptake to ensure equity in vaccine access for the entire population.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health (i) which groups are exempt from the 10-day quarantine rule for travellers coming back from GB; (ii) whether there is a planned relaxation of this rule; and (iii) whether relatives travelling back from GB after providing childcare to relatives must quarantine for 10 days.

**(AQW 16219/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** People should not travel in or out of Northern Ireland except where it is essential to do so.

If you are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area and you plan to remain here for at least 24 hours, public health advice is that you should self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days, unless you are exempt.

Some people travelling within the Common Travel Area may be exempt from self-isolation due to the job they do. Information on sector specific exemptions is available at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-travel-within-common-travel-area-sector-exemptions>

An indicative date of 24 May has been set to allow individuals to travel within the Common Travel Area to visit family and friends.

This means you will not have to self-isolate for 10 days if you are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area to visit family or friends, however the public health advice is to take a pre-departure Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test, and then a LFD test on day 2 and day 8 post arrival in NI.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of COVID-19 cases closed by contact tracing after no telephone calls were attempted.

**(AQW 16237/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Public Health Agency (PHA) has advised that since the establishment of the NI Contact Tracing Service there have been 116,548 positive cases added to the Contact Tracing system. Of these, 95.7% received a call.

For the remaining 4.3% that did not receive a call, PHA has advised that the majority of these cases occurred during October 2020 when case volumes rose significantly in a very short period. In this period a number of cases exceeded the 72 hour period when contact tracing is most effective.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) how the GP Out of Hours Service works in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) the number of (a) GP; and (b) nursing and support shifts to be filled each week in the Southern Trust, broken down by location.

**(AQW 16350/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:**

**(i) How the GP Out of Hours Service works in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust**

The Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT) provides Out of Hours General Practitioner Medical cover through the Out of Hours Urgent Care Service (previously known as GP Out Of Hours).

The Service is contactable by patients who are registered with a SHSCT locality GP Surgery or are temporarily residing in the SHSCT area and presenting with a medical condition which cannot wait to be dealt with until their normal GP surgery reopens.

The Service is contactable by telephoning 028 38 399201 between the hours of 6pm-8am Monday to Friday and over the 24 hour period at weekends and Public Holidays.

When service users (or their carers) make contact with the Service, a trained Call Handler logs their demographic details and presenting symptoms along with any relevant history provided, and prioritises the call in line with Service training and procedures.

Patients are then contacted by an Out of Hours Clinician, who may be a GP, a Nurse Practitioner, a Nurse Advisor or Pharmacist. The Primary Care Clinician undertakes an initial telephone triage assessment with the service user and an appropriate treatment plan is devised which can include a base visit, home visit, self-management or referral to another service.

(ii) **The number of shifts to be filled in the Southern Trust, broken down by location.**

The table below shows the number of GPs providing cover to the 5 local bases weekly:

	Dungannon	Craigavon	Newry	Kilkeel	Armagh
Weekday 6-12pm	2	2	2	1	1
Red eye – 12mn – 8am	1		1		
Weekend 8am – 12mn	2 GPs each morning, afternoon and evening	2 GPs each morning, afternoon and evening	4 GPs each morning, 3 GPs afternoon and evening	1 GP in the morning and evening ( 3hour shift)	1 GP each morning, afternoon and evening

Each base offers various opening times to ensure clinical cover by GPs and nurses at all times within the SHSCT. However, with a change in the delivery of the Service, some of these hours can be covered by GPs who are working from home and providing clinical triage.

In addition to the GP cover, 53 nursing and support staff shifts are also provided. The Nurse Advisors provide a triage function and this can be delivered from any base or home, there is no set rota for this and depends on capacity and demand. There are Reception staff in each base, along with Drivers in Newry, Craigavon and Dungannon as required

It should be noted that the information included in the table is only meant as a guide. The allocation of all staff and resources is subject to ongoing review of the presenting demand and staff availability therefore the actual allocation of staff to specific clinic sites is liable to change.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of (i) GP; and (ii) nursing and allied health professional shifts in the GP Out of Hours Services shifts that have gone unfilled in each of the last 24 months, broken down by location.

**(AQW 16351/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The tables below outline the number of shifts which were not filled by (i) GPs for each base location, and (ii) nursing and allied health professionals

**(i) GPs for each base location**

<b>SHSCT GP Out of Hours Vacant GP Shifts by Base 1st March 2019 – 28th February 2021</b>					
Month	Armagh	Craigavon	Dungannon	Newry	Kilkeel
Mar-19	10	66	63	25	46
Apr-19	35	53	69	26	43
May-19	38	60	70	34	47
Jun-19	21	58	61	25	45
Jul-19	31	52	83	27	65
Aug-19	35	68	76	31	60
Sep-19	21	61	63	27	51
Oct-19	21	64	73	30	46
Nov-19	24	46	56	26	26
Dec-19	27	74	72	25	65
Jan-20	32	72	79	23	63
Feb-20	20	66	65	22	60
Mar-20	22	65	68	24	100
Apr-20	17	51	65	23	66

<b>SHSCT GP Out of Hours Vacant GP Shifts by Base 1st March 2019 – 28th February 2021</b>					
<b>Month</b>	<b>Armagh</b>	<b>Craigavon</b>	<b>Dungannon</b>	<b>Newry</b>	<b>Kilkeel</b>
May-20	23	56	57	30	72
Jun-20	21	44	52	18	74
Jul-20	35	67	89	31	91
Aug-20	34	74	86	35	93
Sep-20	36	63	61	29	87
Oct-20	31	34	60	34	77
Nov-20	28	33	59	29	82
Dec-20	26	59	77	33	93
Jan-21	37	52	94	35	84
Feb-21	25	23	77	26	77

(ii) nursing and allied health professionals

<b>SHSCT GP Out of Hours Nursing/Pharmacist Vacant Shifts 1st March 2019 - 28th Feb 2021</b>	
<b>Month</b>	<b>Vacant Shifts</b>
Mar-19	80
Apr-19	78
May-19	108
Jun-19	85
Jul-19	82
Aug-19	96
Sep-19	104
Oct-19	90
Nov-19	86
Dec-19	134
Jan-20	79
Feb-20	99
Mar-20	109
Apr-20	50
May-20	67
Jun-20	50
Jul-20	72
Aug-20	115
Sep-20	93
Oct-20	89
Nov-20	71
Dec-20	98
Jan-21	102
Feb-21	64

Support staff provide a triage function which can be delivered from any base or home and therefore there is no set rota for each base and depends on capacity and demand. There are Reception staff in each base, along with Drivers in Newry, Craigavon and Dungannon as required.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health whether his Department or Health and Social Care Trusts determine how many miscarriages a woman will undergo before medical tests for the cause of the miscarriages are undertaken; and what is that determination.

**(AQW 16487/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The current criteria for consideration of a referral by GPs to Secondary Care gynaecology services for miscarriage investigations, which may include medical testing, were developed by the gynaecology workstream of the Outpatient Reform Programme in 2016. They are based on the guidance from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. The criteria are:

- All women with 3 or more consecutive miscarriages;
- All women with 1 or more second trimester miscarriages;
- All women with a history of miscarriage and an associated condition such as antiphospholipid syndrome, PCOS, chronic medical disorder;
- All women over 35 years old with 2 or more miscarriages.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail the current COVID-19 regulations on church services.

**(AQW 16518/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Churches are permitted to open for acts of worship, although most made a voluntary decision to close for in-person services from 7 January 2021.

If the number of attendees exceeds the current indoor gathering limits of 6 people from more than 2 households or outdoor gatherings of 10 people from more than 2 households, including at wedding and funerals, the person responsible for organising or operating the gathering must carry out a risk assessment and put in place, implement and maintain mitigating measures to reduce the risk of virus transmission.

From 24 May, subject to review by the Executive on 20 May, the numbers permitted for indoor gatherings, (not including domestic settings), will be as permitted by a risk assessment of the venue. Where the gathering is of more than 15 people, it must be an organised gathering with a risk assessment and mitigating measures.

Face coverings are mandatory within a place of worship and when entering or leaving, except for the person leading the service and the two parties to a marriage or civil partnership.

Funerals, marriages and civil partnerships have additional requirements. A person responsible for the organisation or operation of a marriage or civil partnership or the organiser or operator of the funeral or associated event must take measures to obtain visitor information either in advance or at the time of attendance. This consists of the name and telephone number of each person aged 16 years or above in attendance; the date and time of arrival; record the visitor information in a filing system; and retain visitor information for a period of 21 days beginning with the date on which the visit occurred.

The organiser or operator must destroy visitor information as soon as reasonably practicable after the 21 day period unless there is another basis on which the details may lawfully be retained. The visitor information must be provided to a relevant person as soon as reasonably practicable but in any event within 24 hours of a request, if so requested by that person.

Whether a person is attending or is responsible for organising or operating a funeral or associated event in a Church, funeral directors or elsewhere they must comply with the guidance for handling the infection risks when caring for the deceased and managing funerals issued by the Department of Health <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-guidance-surrounding-death>

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health to outline the reasons for the current waiting times for a child to receive an autism assessment; and what action he is taking to reduce these waiting times.

**(AQW 16995/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** I am acutely aware of the significant waiting lists for autism assessment and it is well documented that these have increased due to the impact of the pandemic. Throughout this time, the ability of our Trusts to deliver the observational element of the autism assessment was severely constrained due to the need to adhere to public health guidelines and also the impact of PPE on the individual being assessed; this would render the assessment invalid.

Throughout this time, Trusts have worked diligently to identify an alternative method of conducting this element of assessment and support

and interventions have continued to be provided through digital platforms and clinician led helplines.

Whilst autism assessments are operational matters for individual Trusts, I acknowledge that the extensive waiting times are presenting challenges for the families involved. In recognition of this I have recently published an interim autism strategy, which will work towards implementing an integrated and streamlined pathway of care for children and young people across

the region and will place emphasis on the need for early intervention approaches and support to meet the needs of individuals and their families and carers.

My officials are in discussions with colleagues in the Health and Social Care sector to identify factors which are contributing to delays in assessment and the actions being taken to address them. This will further inform actions to be progressed within both the interim autism strategy and the future direction of a longer term strategy.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of categorising people that work at asymptomatic testing centres as health and social care workers for the purposes of vaccination priority.

**(AQW 17040/17-22)**

**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.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Health what action is being taken to enforce the COVID-19 Public Health restrictions concerning close contact services, specifically hairdressing and barbering.

**(AQW 17046/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** I appreciate the thought, time and expense that business owners have given to putting additional safety measures in place, however businesses must also continue to take necessary precautions as restrictions ease to remain COVID secure and protect employees and customers.

In consultation with industry, guidance has been produced on how to work safely in different types of workplace. Guidance for close contact services is available at:

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/keeping-workers-and-clients-safe-during-covid-19-close-contact-services>

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. Relevant Departments, organisations and local government will continue to provide advice and support.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans to expand or improve respite provision in Foyle.

**(AQW 17108/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Mencap and Golden Lane have been commissioned to develop a new facility, which will open in Autumn 2022, offering provision to seven service users at time. In relation to children's services, a recruitment exercise is underway to expand provision by September 2021.

The Trust are reviewing the current range of short breaks options for older people and considering all options available.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the number of children currently waiting for an ADHD assessments; (ii) the waiting times for ADHD assessment in each Health and Social Care Trust; and (iii) the support available to families waiting for an ADHD assessment.

**(AQW 17126/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:**

(i) and (ii) – The number of children currently waiting for an ADHD assessment and the waiting times for ADHD assessments in each Trust area are as follows:

HSC Trust	No of Children	Waiting times
Belfast	1,287	208 weeks
Northern	60	4 – 6 weeks
South Eastern	467	68 weeks

HSC Trust	No of Children	Waiting times
Southern	205	38 weeks
Western	562	238 weeks

- (iii) There is a range of support available for families waiting for an ADHD assessment, which include formal programmes, one to one support as well as online resources, as follows:
- **RISE NI**, (Regional Integrated Support for Education): A parent website for the parents and carers of children in mainstream nurseries and primary schools (up to P4).
  - **Parenting NI**: which provides a range of parenting support, including managing challenging behaviour, walking on egg shells etc. for both primary and secondary school aged children.
  - **ADD-NI**: a charity that works to support carers regionally, based in Belfast.
  - **Family Support Hubs**: which provide support and intervention in the community for families who are managing a range of systemic stressors, which are all important to consider in understanding and managing a child's behaviour – including those awaiting ADHD assessment.
  - **Relate NI**: Relate's mission is to enhance emotional wellbeing in individuals, couples, families and communities by delivering professional counselling and therapeutic services.
  - **New Life Counselling**: New Life Counselling provides high quality counselling services and is part of Action Mental Health.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health how five-year and ten-year survival rates in Northern Ireland, for each type of cancer, compare to other parts of the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 17173/17-22)

**Mr Swann**: At present the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (NICR) have not carried out ten-year survival analysis on any type of cancer. It does however routinely carry out five-year survival analysis on many of the cancer sites. This analysis was part of an international study led by the EUROCARE-5 project investigating survival of cancer patients diagnosed in 2000-2007 with residence in Europe. This survival information, and a UK and Republic of Ireland comparison, is detailed in Table 1 below for 25 major cancer sites.

**Table 1. Age-standardised five-year Relative Survival (RSC %) for patients diagnosed in 2000-2007 for 25 major malignant cancers, by Regions of the UK and Republic of Ireland with corresponding 95% Confidence Intervals.**

Site	Northern Ireland			England			Scotland			Wales			Republic of Ireland		
	RSC	LB	UB	RSC	LB	UB	RSC	LB	UB	RSC	LB	UB	RSC	LB	UB
Head and Neck	48.96	44.36	54.03	46.11	45.33	46.91	43.05	41.08	45.11	42.70	39.79	45.82	42.09	39.01	45.42
Esophagus	16.12 *	13.73	18.92	12.37	11.97	12.79	10.99	9.97	12.13	13.13	11.66	14.79	15.55 *	13.88	17.43
Stomach	18.06	15.89	20.52	17.00	16.57	17.44	16.11	14.96	17.35	17.78	16.21	19.50	20.32	18.72	22.05
Colorectal	54.00	52.50	55.54	52.08	51.80	52.35	53.84	53.03	54.66	50.95	49.91	52.03	54.32	53.29	55.37
Colon	54.25	52.36	56.21	51.34	50.98	51.70	53.88	52.86	54.91	49.94	48.59	51.33	54.97	53.66	56.31
Rectum	54.32	51.85	56.90	53.74	53.30	54.17	54.19	52.86	55.56	52.61	50.94	54.33	53.01	51.36	54.72
Liver	8.87	5.89	13.36	8.24	7.71	8.81	7.40	6.08	9.00	8.71	6.72	11.30	12.99	10.53	16.02
Pancreas	3.02	1.84	4.96	4.67	4.37	4.98	3.44	2.76	4.30	5.37	4.31	6.69	6.88	5.76	8.22
Lung	11.04	10.03	12.16	8.80	8.63	8.98	8.65	8.22	9.11	8.55	7.91	9.24	11.82	11.10	12.59
Soft Tissue	58.40	51.85	65.76	57.63	56.39	58.90	56.39	52.62	60.43	60.20	55.74	65.02	62.70	58.19	67.55
Skin Melanoma	90.74	88.46	93.08	85.35	84.93	85.77	88.82	87.58	90.08	80.05	78.24	81.89	86.44	84.88	88.03
Breast	82.12	80.55	83.71	79.30	79.06	79.55	78.46	77.65	79.28	78.20	77.21	79.20	79.01	77.87	80.16
Cervix Uteri	61.13	56.34	66.32	59.59	58.72	60.47	57.89	55.45	60.44	58.10	55.00	61.38	58.87	55.75	62.16
Corpus Uteri	73.58	69.96	77.38	75.72	75.12	76.32	76.87	74.85	78.95	73.65	71.38	76.00	74.16	71.35	77.09
Ovary	32.27	29.37	35.45	30.57	30.05	31.11	34.02	32.51	35.60	31.66	29.71	33.74	30.34	28.35	32.46
Prostate	83.33	81.48	85.23	80.26	79.95	80.58	78.83	77.74	79.94	78.03	76.87	79.22	85.50	84.47	86.54
Testis	89.11	87.01	91.26	91.81	90.19	93.46	91.61	87.17	96.28	88.31	82.70	94.31	-	-	-
Urinary Bladder	76.13	73.81	78.52	72.34	71.97	72.71	48.98	47.10	50.94	71.67	70.22	73.16	73.40	71.51	75.33

Site	Northern Ireland			England			Scotland			Wales			Republic of Ireland		
	RSC	LB	UB	RSC	LB	UB	RSC	LB	UB	RSC	LB	UB	RSC	LB	UB
Kidney	48.56	45.28	52.08	47.32	46.74	47.90	46.08	44.42	47.81	49.80	47.64	52.06	51.75	49.43	54.18
Thyroid	79.89	74.62	85.53	81.06	80.11	82.03	81.59	78.58	84.70	76.90	73.16	80.83	75.29	71.22	79.60
Plasma cell	42.30	38.28	46.75	35.41	34.64	36.19	36.62	34.27	39.12	36.69	33.86	39.76	36.15	33.31	39.24
Hodgkin's lymphoma	80.08	75.35	85.11	79.13	78.27	80.00	80.89	78.35	83.51	77.01	73.43	80.76	83.09	79.91	86.39
Non Hodgkin lymphoma	58.99	56.50	61.59	56.73	56.30	57.15	60.34	59.00	61.70	56.61	54.97	58.30	63.04	61.37	64.76
SBLL/CLL	61.53	55.53	68.19	68.83	67.96	69.72	75.66	72.91	78.50	67.19	64.05	70.49	75.69	72.68	78.82
CML	47.99	38.74	59.45	49.57	47.61	51.61	64.62	58.38	71.52	51.91	44.78	60.17	57.94	49.47	67.84
All Sites	51.01	50.47	51.56	50.20	50.11	50.29	46.62	46.35	46.90	49.94	49.58	50.29	53.95	53.57	54.32

**Source:** Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (NICR)

Relative Survival Cumulative (RSC), Lower Bound 95% Confidence Interval (LB), Upper Bound 95% Confidence Interval (UB)

\* Age standardised survival value is unexpectedly high compared to the European mean for this rapidly fatal cancer. This can be due to several reasons including: i) random variations and instability in one or more age classes; ii) problems in the follow up ascertainment; iii) problems in capturing all incident cases, particularly those with worse prognosis, or difficulties in accessing death certificates or in tracing back cases known by death certificate only.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health to outline the reasons for the current waiting times for adults to receive an autism assessment; and what action he is taking to reduce these waiting times.

**(AQW 17205/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** I am aware of the extensive waiting lists for autism and that this situation has been further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. I am also mindful that given the prevalence rates of autism in our children today we must consider the impact that this will have on adult service provision in the years to come.

A review of adult autism services, which would include the reasons for waiting lists and how we plan for future provision, was due to commence last April, however due to the emerging priorities that were placed upon to the Health and Social Care sector, this work had to be paused. However, this has been included as a key priority in my interim autism strategy for action in 2021 and 2022.

There is no current Commissioning Plan Direction target for adults to receive an autism assessment from point of referral. Current waiting times for an adult autism assessment, broken down by HSC Trust are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: The number of adults waiting for an autism assessment by HSC Trust (31 January 2021)**

HSC Trust	Waiting time (weeks)							Total
	0-8	>8-13	>13-18	>18-26	>26-39	>39-52	>52	
Belfast	6	9	16	7	12	26	382	458
Northern	34	26	15	52	54	33	0	214
South Eastern	10	8	9	14	24	37	109	211
Southern	4	9	6	7	8	15	145	194
Western	4	10	6	9	13	19	77	138
Northern Ireland	58	62	52	89	111	130	713	1,215

**Source:** Health and Social Care Board Monthly Adult ASD Minimum Dataset Returns from HSC Trusts.

**Note:** These are active waits.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health to detail the current (i) target times for an adult to receive an autism assessment from point of referral; and (ii) current wait times for an assessment, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

**(AQW 17206/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** I am aware of the extensive waiting lists for autism and that this situation has been further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. I am also mindful that given the prevalence rates of autism in our children today we must consider the impact that this will have on adult service provision in the years to come.

A review of adult autism services, which would include the reasons for waiting lists and how we plan for future provision, was due to commence last April, however due to the emerging priorities that were placed upon to the Health and Social Care sector, this work had to be paused. However, this has been included as a key priority in my interim autism strategy for action in 2021 and 2022.

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Northern Ireland	58	62	52	89	111	130	713	1,215

**Source:** Health and Social Care Board Monthly Adult ASD Minimum Dataset Returns from HSC Trusts.

**Note:** These are active waits.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health why his original answer to AQW 15365/17-22 was changed.  
(AQW 17260/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** My Department routinely discusses with other Departments, including the Department of Finance, the Answers to Questions for Written Answer when they concern matters that are the responsibility of more than one Department.

Following such a discussion between officials on AQW 15365/17-22, it was apparent that that my Answer was inaccurate in not making clear that 3(1)(d) of the Derry and Strabane City and District Council area provisions provided an exemption for "a gathering in a workplace, when it is not reasonably practicable for the duties of any person participating in the gathering to be carried out at that person's private dwelling".

When the inaccuracy became known to me I apologised to the Member and provided a corrected Answer, which was placed in the Library of the House.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail the current restrictions on travel within the Common Travel Area; and (ii) what consideration has been given to easing these restrictions.  
(AQW 17468/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** People should not travel in or out of Northern Ireland except where it is essential to do so.

If you are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area and you plan to remain here for at least 24 hours, public health advice is that you should self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days, unless you are exempt.

Some people travelling within the Common Travel Area may be exempt from self-isolation due to the job they do. Information on sector specific exemptions is available at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-travel-within-common-travel-area-sector-exemptions>

An indicative date of 24 May has been set to allow individuals to travel within the Common Travel Area to visit family and friends.

This means you will not have to self-isolate for 10 days if you are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area to visit family or friends, however the public health advice is to take a pre-departure Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test, and then a LFD test on day 2 and day 8 post arrival in NI.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health what consideration he has given to the easing of COVID-19 travel restrictions to other parts of the UK.  
(AQW 17539/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** People should not travel in or out of Northern Ireland except where it is essential to do so.

If you are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area and you plan to remain here for at least 24 hours, public health advice is that you should self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days, unless you are exempt.



Some people travelling within the Common Travel Area may be exempt from self-isolation due to the job they do. Information on sector specific exemptions is available at:

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This means you will not have to self-isolate for 10 days if you are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area to visit family or friends, however the public health advice is to take a pre-departure Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test, and then a LFD test on day 2 and day 8 post arrival in NI.

The Executive has committed to a four-week review cycle, where we monitor the data on a range of health and societal impacts, before considering what relaxations can be made safely. While the Executive formally reviews and make decisions on restrictions every four weeks, our monitoring cycle provides us with the ability to move more rapidly on emerging priorities should the need arise before the next review point.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health how many people received the drug Epanutin to treat epilepsy or other neurological conditions over the last 10 years.

**(AQW 17541/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The dispensing data, collected by the HSC Business Services Organisation (BSO), does not capture the indication for which a drug has been prescribed and subsequently dispensed. However, between January 2011 and December 2020, there were a total of 2,763 unique patients who received some form of the drug Epanutin and/or the generic equivalent drug, Phenytoin. There were 1,417 unique patients who received the branded Epanutin.

The table overleaf, a breakdown of patients per calendar year, shows the number of individual patients who received Epanutin and/or Phenytoin in each of the last 10 years.

**Number of patients receiving Epanutin/Phenytoin, 2011 - 2020<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup>**

Year	Number of Patients Receiving Epanutin and/or Phenytoin <sup>5</sup>	Number of Patients receiving Epanutin	Number of Patients receiving Phenytoin
2011	1,856	1,270	630
2012	1,749	1,204	1,059
2013	1,438	180	1,344
2014	1,301	80	1,241
2015	1,233	77	1,168
2016	1,160	64	1,106
2017	1,088	54	1,040
2018	1,041	48	1,001
2019	996	41	970
2020	937	29	919

**Source:** Prescribing and dispensing information systems, Family Practitioner Services, HSC Business Services Organisation.

- 1 The number of individual patients who received the specified drug in the year that the prescription was scanned and paid by BSO. Patients may be counted more than once over the ten year period. Similarly, patients may have received both the branded Epanutin and generic Phenytoin. In 2012, the company that manufactured Epanutin transferred its Marketing Authorisations to another company which debranded or genericised the drug.
- 2 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.
- 3 The number of patients is the number of estimated unique patients whose dispensed scripts have been successfully matched against the central GP patient register in each year. If a patient has one or more prescriptions, the patient will be counted once.
- 4 The full list of Epanutin products included in the table are: Epanutin 25mg capsules, Epanutin 50mg capsules, Epanutin 100mg capsules, Epanutin 300mg capsules, Epanutin 30mg/5ml oral suspension, Epanutin Infatabs 50mg chewable tablets, Epanutin Ready-Mixed Parenteral 250mg/5ml solution for injection ampoules, Phenytoin sodium 25mg capsules, Phenytoin sodium 50mg capsules, Phenytoin 50mg chewable tablets, Phenytoin sodium 100mg tablets, Phenytoin sodium 100mg capsules, Phenytoin sodium 300mg capsules, Phenytoin sodium 250mg/5ml solution for injection ampoules, Phenytoin 30mg/5ml oral suspension.

- 5 Please note, the 'number of patients receiving Epanutin' and the 'number of patients receiving Phenytoin' do not sum to the 'number of patients receiving Epanutin and/or Phenytoin'; those patients who have received both drugs in the time period are only counted once in the total for 'number of patients receiving Epanutin and/or Phenytoin'.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health when Coronavirus regulations will be amended to allow partners to attend hospital and medical appointments.

**(AQW 17543/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My officials recently completed a review of the guidance for all healthcare settings. New guidance for visiting in hospices and hospitals was issued on 30 April 2021, effective from 7 May 2021.

The updated guidance allows that, in the majority of cases:

"One person only to be facilitated to accompany each patient where the environment is COVID secure."

The full guidance (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>) sets out the detailed guidance for each category of care.

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health what action is being taken by his Department to ensure that a permanent solution is found to secure the future of Bannview Medical Practice in Portadown.

**(AQW 17548/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Southern Health and Social Care Trust is continuing to work closely with the Health and Social Care Board and the Department to address the current situation at Bannview and put longer term arrangements in place to maintain the provision of GMS services in the Practice.

In the meantime I would like to assure you, and the patients of Bannview, that the Practice remains open and patients should continue to contact the Practice as normal for their ongoing care.

All the necessary clinics, for example vaccination and smear clinics, are continuing. Additional clinical staff, for example pharmacists, physiotherapist, mental health nurses, have been made available by the Southern Trust.

The administration team remains fully operational.

The Health and Social Care Board advertised the contract for the provision of GMS services to patients currently registered with Bannview, with perspective applicants having until Friday 30th April to apply for the contract.

A number of applications have been received and the Health and Social Care Board will now work through the process of assessing these applications with a view to securing a permanent long term solution that ensure that patients will continue to have access to GP led services.

I would ask patients and local political representatives to remain patient as we continue to work through this important process.

I hope this provides you with reassurance that we are working to ensure GMS services continue to be provided to the patients of Bannview Medical Practice.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Pay Review Body for staff for 2021-22.

**(AQW 17574/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The NHS Pay Review Body (NHSPRB) is an advisory non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department of Health and Social Care in England.

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.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to list each occasion since taking office that he has directly met with his counterparts in (i) Cardiff; (ii) Dublin; (iii) Edinburgh; and (iv) London.

**(AQW 17653/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** All my meetings with external stakeholders are published on a quarterly basis; <https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/dataset>

My meetings from January-March 2021 will be published in May, with the same accessible link.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health in what circumstances residents of Northern Ireland are permitted to travel to the Republic of Ireland.

**(AQW 17664/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Although there is currently no legal barrier to travel into and out of Northern Ireland for any reason we continue to ask everyone to avoid travel unless absolutely necessary in the interests of public health. Guidance on essential travel is provided at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-travel-within-common-travel-area>

For those returning to Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area and who plan to remain here for at least 24 hours, the public health advice is that they should self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days, unless you are exempt

An indicative date of 24 May has been set to allow individuals to travel within the Common Travel Area to visit family and friends. This means that people will not have to self-isolate for 10 days if they are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area to visit family or friends, however the public health advice is to take a pre-departure Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test, and then a LFD test on day 2 and day 8 post arrival in NI.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given by Health and Social Care Trusts to relax restrictions for pre and anti-natal maternity services.

**(AQW 17676/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My officials keep the visiting guidelines under constant review. New guidance for visiting in hospices and hospitals - including Maternity and other services, is in the final stages of consultation with stakeholders and will be issued shortly.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health whether a review has taken place regarding the visitation arrangements in residential care facilities for family members.

**(AQW 17677/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** A new approach to supporting the safe and proportionate increased visiting in care homes is being developed by the Public Health Agency and will include updated arrangements for the safe management of care home residents receiving visitors, as well as residents being able to visit other households, community facilities and take part in excursions.

This new guidance for visiting care homes in Northern Ireland will be issued shortly.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health when restrictions will be lifted to allow partners to attend maternity appointments.

**(AQW 17679/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My officials keep the visiting guidelines under constant review. New guidance for visiting in hospices and hospitals - including Maternity and other services, is in the final stages of a rapid consultation with stakeholders and will be issued shortly.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the £500 Covid Recognition Payment to Health Service staff.

**(AQW 17690/17-22)**

**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.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health how many people will be included in the third Neurology recall; and whether this will include those who were not part of the second recall.

**(AQW 17717/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** A total of 276 patients are included in the neurology patient Cohort 3 recall. No patients who received a Cohort 3 recall letter on 20 April 2021 were previously invited to attend an appointment as part of Cohort 2 recall.

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.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health for an indicative date for the start of the Public Inquiry into Neurology Services under Dr Watt.

**(AQW 17718/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The non-statutory Independent Neurology Inquiry was established in May 2018 as part of a series of actions in response to the recall of neurology patients by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

The Inquiry was converted to a statutory inquiry, under the Inquiries Act 2005, on 11 December 2020.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health how many staff working in Muckamore Abbey have been charged by the PSNI.

**(AQW 17721/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** While I cannot comment on an ongoing police investigation, I can confirm that none of the seven individuals who were referred to in the Public Prosecution Service statement of 16 April are currently working at Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health what development plans he has for the vacant ground, the former Joss Cardwell site, at the junction of the Holywood Road and the Circular Road, Belfast.

**(AQW 17732/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** This site remains critical to planning of the Belfast Trust's Children's Residential Care Services and the Trust have submitted a proposal for the development of the site. 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.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to detail the capital and resource spend on autism services for (i) 2020; and (ii) 2021.

**(AQW 17741/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department has made significant investment in autism services since 2016, with an additional £2 million being allocated to children's autism services on a recurrent basis.

However, service provision and supports for both adults and children are funded across a range of programmes and services, which, dependent on need, may include both generic services and those of a specialist nature provided by multi-disciplinary staff.

As funding in relation to these services are covered by a number of budgets it is not possible to give precise details for specific spend on autism services.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to outline the timeframe for designing a new long-term autism strategy in partnership with service users, their families, staff and community and voluntary sector organisations.

**(AQW 17742/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** You will be aware that my Department has in recent weeks published an Autism – Interim Strategy for the years 2021 and 2022. My officials are currently working with colleagues across Departments and within the Health and Social Care sector as we implement the actions being taken forward by the strategy. However, you are aware of my commitment to develop a longer term strategy which will be due for implementation in 2023. In preparation for this my Department has established an Autism Forum which is comprised of community and voluntary sector representatives and also autistic people, their families and carers. An initial meeting of the Forum, in workshop format, was held on 28 April 2021 with further engagement planned. The role of the Forum will include informing priorities and assisting with the co-production of a longer term autism strategy for the period 2023-2028. Timescales will be determined as this progresses.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health when the report into the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority board resignations will be published.

**(AQW 17769/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The final report containing recommendations has been submitted to the Department for consideration. The Department shall be publishing the findings soon along with any further response or actions required.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail the mechanisms in place to ensure (i) the organisation in charge of distributing money from the Carers Support Fund correctly determines which applicants should receive funding; (ii) that those carers not affiliated with a community and voluntary group will receive funds; (iii) the personal data of applicants for the fund is protected; and (iv) that those who need the money from the fund receive it.

**(AQW 17786/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Support for Carers' Fund has been established with the aim of providing funds to charitable organisations who can deliver the following outcomes in support of carers:

- a) Enhanced provision of and access to practical supports and help for carers.
- b) Improved access to and availability of advice services for carers, including support available through new technologies.
- c) Enhanced skills of carers to advocate for the needs of both themselves and the person they care for.
- d) Support improved physical and mental health and wellbeing of carers.
- e) Enhanced ability for carers to lead their own lives and enjoy a work/life balance.
- f) Increased capacity to advocate for and advance carers' issues with Government and statutory bodies.
- g) Raised awareness of the contribution of carers.
- h) Improved evidence base on carers to support and inform service provision, and Government strategy.

The Fund will be open to community and voluntary sector organisations with charitable purposes offering support to carers and operating within Northern Ireland. The Fund will not provide for cash sums to be paid to individuals.

The Community Foundation NI (CFNI), who will manage the Fund on the Department's behalf, have begun work to develop the Fund and ensure that when it opens for applications it will be effective in reaching eligible organisations and encouraging applications which can deliver on the above outcomes. The organisation is compliant with all the necessary data protection legislation.

Community Foundation NI will engage with carers and those working at the community level to ensure funding reaches the areas of need and to encourage projects.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health when patients' partners will be allowed to attend hospital appointments.

**(AQW 17839/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My officials keep the visiting guidelines under constant review. New guidance for visiting in hospices and hospitals - including Maternity and other services, is in the final stages of a rapid consultation with stakeholders and will be issued shortly.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health when patients attending rehabilitation centres and appointments will be able to attend with family members and partners.

**(AQW 17841/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My officials keep the visiting guidelines under constant review. New guidance for visiting in hospices and hospitals - including Maternity and other services, is in the final stages of a rapid consultation with stakeholders and will be issued shortly.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health whether safeguards will be put in place to protect Northern Ireland's access to treatment, including non-branded drugs from UK pharmaceutical companies and suppliers, currently threatened by post-Brexit red tape.

**(AQW 17866/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** At the end of 2020, the UK government negotiated a phased implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP) requirements for medicines moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland with the European Union Commission, to give Industry up to the 31 December 2021 to prepare to adapt to the regulatory measures required by the Protocol.

My Department is working closely with DHSC, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), other NI and UK Departments as well as the pharmaceutical industry to mitigate any risk to the medicines supply chain.

The DHSC preparation plans include a multi-layered approach for medicines and medical products to help ensure continuity of supply. This includes ensuring industry is aware of the action they need to take and the possible mitigations to put in place.

In addition, the Northern Ireland Protocol Programme Board has been set up by DHSC to work towards solutions for industry and to mitigate any risk to the Northern Ireland medicines supply chain. The Programme Board is attended fortnightly by my officials, and this work is ongoing.

There are already national and locally tried and tested mitigation arrangements in place for the surveillance of supply chains and for dealing with any supply disruptions to ensure that patients continue to get the medicines and medical supplies they need. These include (but not limited to) communicating with the primary and secondary healthcare settings detailing any potential shortages or issues with the supply chain and the best alternative products.

We can assure the public that we are working with all stakeholders to mitigate against disruption.

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Health what mechanisms are in place to collect information about the side effects of, and reactions to, COVID-19 vaccines.

**(AQW 17869/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Reports of any suspected adverse drug reactions (ADRs) are made directly to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) via the Yellow Card scheme.

The Yellow Card scheme is the UK system for collecting and monitoring information on suspected safety concerns or incidents involving medicines and medical devices. MHRA will consider all the information received and decide if the vaccine requires further investigation.

The purpose of the scheme is to provide an early warning that the safety of a product may require further investigation and relies on voluntary reporting of suspected ADRs by health professionals and members of the public (patients, users, or carers).

Reports can be made for all medicines including vaccines, blood factors and immunoglobulins, herbal medicines and homeopathic remedies, and all medical devices available on the UK market. A link to a summary of data from these reports is below:-

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-vaccine-adverse-reactions>

In addition to this each Trust has a clinical incident reporting system where staff report any incident involving a medicine. Arrangements are in place to ensure there is a regional approach taken on the reporting of all suspected adverse reactions which might be connected to the Covid-19 Vaccines. These reports are shared with Departmental officials who will continue to monitor the situation.

Further information about the Yellow Card scheme, including its contribution to identifying safety issues can be found on the Yellow Card website.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health to detail the average waiting time for occupational therapy in East Belfast, from GP referral until a patient visit is undertaken; and what action is being taken to reduce the waiting time.

**(AQW 17889/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Department does not hold this information centrally and it was requested from Belfast Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust. Information on the average waiting time for an appointment with an Occupational Therapist is not available, however information on waiting times (in bands) for active waits is available and shown in the table below.

Table 1. Number of active waits by time bands for occupational therapy, from GP referral until a patient visit is undertaken, in East Belfast, as at month end March 2021.

HSC Trust	0-3 weeks	3-6 weeks	6-9 weeks	9-13 weeks	Over 13 weeks
Belfast	81	77	44	67	479

**Source:** Belfast HSC Trust

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Health when AQW 16478/17-22 will be answered.

**(AQW 17895/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** An answer to AQW 16478/17-22 has been completed and the member ought now to have received the response.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health whether the pandemic has led to an increase in trauma related referrals for people with autism.

**(AQW 17919/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The number of trauma related referrals for people with autism as a result of the pandemic is not held by my Department, nor is this readily available from current Health and Social Care Trust information systems.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health whether pregnant women will access the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine from their doctors or community pharmacists.

**(AQW 17922/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Due to the additional handling and governance considerations for Pfizer Biontech, this vaccine is only available through Trust Vaccination Centres and is not available through GP practices or community pharmacy.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health whether out of hours GP services will continue to be provided at Magherafelt Hospital.

**(AQW 17960/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Dalriada Urgent Care (DUC) is the organisation responsible for GP Out of Hours services provided in the Northern Area which includes Magherafelt.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic and the increasing use of remote consultations, fewer patients who contact GP Out of Hours services have needed to be seen face to face in an Out of Hours base.

After a review of infection control, staffing and patient safety issues at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic DUC's face to face services have been temporarily relocated from Ballymena, Whiteabbey and Magherafelt to the Antrim Hospital site.

The Coleraine centre remains on the Causeway Hospital site, and the Ballymena GP OOH base has become a Covid Centre site for the Northern Area.

The current arrangements for the provision of the OOHs service will be kept under review as we emerge from the current pandemic.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to detail the funding provided to the Patient and Client Council, including spend broken down to associated areas of responsibility and duties.

**(AQW 17961/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Funding has been provided to the Patient Client Council as follows:

Financial year	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17
Allocation	1,502,174	1,448,927	1,365,232	1,378,196	1,450,733
Voluntary Exit Scheme	-	-	74,471	85,339	64,808
Bamford funding	114,669	114,669	114,669	114,669	120,704
Make Change Together – PCC Membership Scheme (Transformation Funding)	122,768	76,000	50,000	-	-
Independent Advocacy provision at Muckamore Abbey Hospital (Transformation Funding)	66,464	50,111	-	-	-
Mental Health Champion	352,000	-	-	-	-
Mental Health Campaign	20,000	-	-	-	-
Covid-19	178,788	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,356,863</b>	<b>1,689,707</b>	<b>1,604,372</b>	<b>1,578,204</b>	<b>1,636,245</b>

Funding amounts for 2021/22 have not yet been finalised.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health what action he is taking in response to the suspension of early medical abortion services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust; and how he will ensure that Trusts meet Northern Ireland's legal responsibilities to provide abortion services.

**(AQW 17981/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department was informed by the Western Health and Social Care Trust on 23 April 2021 that its Early Medical Abortion (EMA) service would be temporarily paused with effect from that evening due to staff resource issues. My Department is continuing to monitor ongoing efforts by the Trust to restore delivery of these services with minimum disruption. At this stage it is not known how long services will be paused for. In the meantime, and in the event of a prolonged pause in service, it is likely that women residing in the Western Trust area will be referred to the central contact point for the English services which remain available to women from Northern Ireland (managed by the British Pregnancy Advice Service).

The Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No 2) Regulations 2020 provided a new legal basis for medical professionals in Northern Ireland to terminate pregnancies lawfully from 31 March 2020. Under the Regulations, my Department is not required to commission the relevant services, however my Department has advised Trusts that the Regulations require such terminations to be carried out on Health and Social Care premises by registered medical professionals.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health whether there are any specific issues with the delivery of second vaccine doses to adult centres.

**(AQW 18039/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The vaccination programme was delivered to adult day centres by the various Trusts.

At time of writing, Southern, Western and Belfast Trusts have completed delivery of both doses to vaccine to adult day centres. Western Trust have been delivering second doses on 11th and 12th May with a final clinic on 19th May.

Northern trust was delayed by one week with the delivery of second vaccine to service users in Adult Day Centres. This was due to staff on sick leave and the ability to release appropriately trained staff with the skill set required to administer the vaccine. To address this issue, one service user was vaccinated at a Trust vaccination centre but all other service users accepted the position and received their second dose at 11 weeks which is within JCVI guidance.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 17013/17-22, for a breakdown of the services purchased into types of services, for each year.

**(AQW 18052/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Pursuant to AQW 17013/17-22, a breakdown of the services purchased from the Republic of Ireland, by type and year, are set out in the table below.

Services Purchased	2015/16 £000's	2016/17 £000's	2017/18 £000's	2018/19 £000's	2019/20 £000's
Acute/ Cancer Services/ WLI/ Elective	2,575	3,835	1,795	3,619	3,018
Learning Disability	62	83	80	88	85
Children's Services- High Cost placements	606	2,459	2,876	3,959	4,273

Services Purchased	2015/16 £000's	2016/17 £000's	2017/18 £000's	2018/19 £000's	2019/20 £000's
NI Registry Self Harm	0	25	27	28	31
Extra Contractual Referral- Acute	471	561	3,111	2,872	3,183
Extra Contractual Referral- Non Acute	1,268	2,118	2,818	2,974	2,881
EU Cross Border Reimbursements - Rol Providers	0	0	900	2,500	5,400
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,982</b>	<b>9,082</b>	<b>11,606</b>	<b>16,040</b>	<b>18,870</b>

\*Data Source HSCB. Table may not add exactly due to roundings.

**Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the £500 special recognition payment for Health Service staff. (AQW 18079/17-22)

**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>

We are working to commence payment of the award to HSC statutory sector employees in July. This will facilitate a period in which staff can consider if payment by instalments better suits their individual financial circumstances. Other employers, such as in the Independent Sector, may work to a different timescale. Discussions are ongoing with the Independent Sector around eligibility and payment.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health what measures have been taken to ensure that people who are blind or partially sighted can get access to information on vaccines.

(AQW 18082/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** My Department has been working closely with communities and support organisations to help those people who need additional arrangements in order to be vaccinated, in particular both the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB NI) and Guide Dogs NI.

The Public Health Authority (PHA) have produced vaccination information leaflets in a number of formats including audio recordings.

In addition, Covid-19 vaccinators are drawn from health care professional groups and are familiar with the adjustments required so that all of the eligible population are vaccinated. They are able to provide advice and reassurance at the vaccination appointment.

We have actively sought input and advice from RNIB and have been working closely with them to address the issue and ensure that our service is accessible.

RNIB have kindly allowed the use of their phone line to provide support and offer the details of participating pharmacies. The details of the helpline have been uploaded to NIDirect, COVIDCare and PHA webpages.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health to detail any discussions he has had in relation to community pharmacy supporting any future COVID-19 booster vaccination programme.

(AQW 18099/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** As the member will 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.

We await advice from the JCVI on the scope of the booster programme for autumn / winter.

In the absence of this advice, which is awaited, there is no definitive position around which particular groups/age cohorts will be recommended for vaccination by JCVI, which vaccine(s) will be available or even recommended for particular groups by JCVI.

The design of the winter vaccination programme will depend on the outcome of a number of factors including what the future JCVI recommendations may be.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to outline the financial contribution to the Middletown Centre for Autism for each of the last five years, broken down by area of spend.

(AQW 18117/17-22)



**Mr Swann:** The Middletown Centre for Autism is not funded by my Department. The Centre is jointly funded by the Department for Education (NI) and the Department for Education and Skills (ROI).

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of times a community care package for learning disability ended due to (i) scheduled difference in care needs; and (ii) a crisis admission to an acute service, in each of the last three years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.  
**(AQW 18119/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The information requested is not held by the Department and would require a manual trawl of records at a Trust level, therefore this represents a disproportionate cost to HSC resources.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health how his Department is futureproofing the services provided by allied health professionals, such as speech and language therapists, when planning the transformation of the Health and Social Care.  
**(AQW 18177/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Chief Allied Health Professional (AHP) Officer has a standing invitation to the Rebuilding Management Board to ensure that the voice of AHPs is built into rebuilding proposals. Furthermore, the starting point for major transformation is always the needs of the local population, including in relation to AHP services.

The Chief AHP officer is also involved in many of the Department's major reform projects and staffing models in relation to service transformation always include AHPs, where relevant.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health how much funding has been set aside by his Department and its arm's-length bodies to celebrate the Northern Ireland Centenary.  
**(AQW 18180/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Whilst I obviously very much celebrate Northern Ireland's centenary the opportunities to mark this important milestone are limited from a Department of Health perspective. As such no funding has been set aside.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to list each Integrated Care Partnership, including a breakdown of the full time membership of each partnership.  
**(AQW 18190/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** There are currently 17 Integrated Care Partnerships (ICPs) working throughout Northern Ireland across the five Local Commissioning Group areas.

Each partnership comprises of 15 members across a range of sectors including Community and Voluntary Sector, Service Users and Carers, Local Council officers, Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS), GPs, Pharmacists and HSC Trusts.

Information on current membership is available on the HSC Board website for each local area at: <http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/icps/integrated-care-partnerships/>.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given to the reviewing of self-isolation for those travelling into Northern Ireland from other parts of the UK.  
**(AQW 18220/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** People should not travel in or out of Northern Ireland except where it is essential to do so.

If you are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area and you plan to remain here for at least 24 hours, public health advice is that you should self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days, unless you are exempt.

Some people travelling within the Common Travel Area may be exempt from self-isolation due to the job they do. Information on sector specific exemptions is available at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-travel-within-common-travel-area-sector-exemptions>

An indicative date of 24 May has been set to allow individuals to travel within the Common Travel Area to visit family and friends.

This means you will not have to self-isolate for 10 days if you are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area to visit family or friends, however the public health advice is to take a pre-departure Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test, and then a LFD test on day 2 and day 8 post arrival in NI.

The Executive has committed to a four-week review cycle, where we monitor the data on a range of health and societal impacts, before considering what relaxations can be made safely. While the Executive formally reviews and make decisions on restrictions every four weeks, our monitoring cycle provides us with the ability to move more rapidly on emerging priorities should the need arise before the next review point.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health what follow up work Health and Social Care Trusts and his Department have completed with people that have side effects from the vaccine.

**(AQW 18222/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The member can be aware that Reports of any suspected adverse drug reactions (ADRs) are made directly to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) via the Yellow Card scheme.

The Yellow Card scheme is the UK system for collecting and monitoring information on suspected safety concerns or incidents involving medicines and medical devices. MHRA will consider all the information received and decide if the vaccine requires further investigation.

The purpose of the scheme is to provide an early warning that the safety of a product may require further investigation and relies on voluntary reporting of suspected ADRs by health professionals and members of the public (patients, users, or carers).

Reports can be made for all medicines including vaccines, blood factors and immunoglobulins, herbal medicines and homeopathic remedies, and all medical devices available on the UK market. A link to a summary of data from these reports is below:-

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-vaccine-adverse-reactions>

In addition to this each Trust has a clinical incident reporting system where staff report any incident involving a medicine. Arrangements are in place to ensure there is a regional approach taken on the reporting of all suspected adverse reactions which might be connected to the Covid-19 Vaccines. These reports are shared with Departmental officials who will continue to monitor the situation.

Further information about the Yellow Card scheme, including its contribution to identifying safety issues can be found on the Yellow Card website.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Health to outline his commitment to an inquiry into the underspend of adult learning disability services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

**(AQW 18275/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** As per AQW 17202/17-22, 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.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health how many people diagnosed with inflammatory bowel diseases have personalised care plans.

**(AQW 18290/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Department does not hold this information centrally and it was requested from the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts. The HSC Trusts advised that information on personalised care plans for counselling for persons diagnosed with inflammatory bowel diseases is not collected.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans to recommence normal visitation rights of partners to expectant and new mothers in hospitals.

**(AQW 18305/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My officials recently completed a review of the guidance for all healthcare settings. New guidance for visiting in hospices and hospitals was issued on 30 April 2021, effective from 7 May 2021, and represents a significant easement in the restrictions formerly in place.

In general hospitals, one daily visit from one of two nominated individuals (from up to two households) can be permitted, with the timing/ duration agreed with the person in charge.

In respect of maternity, a chosen birth partner will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to any pregnancy related appointments or ultrasound scans, and to accompany the pregnant woman for induction of labour, duration of labour and birth and, for up to three hours after the birth.

Where the woman is receiving inpatient care, one daily visit from one of two nominated individuals (from up to two households) can be permitted.

Full implementation of the new guidance will be subject to a dynamic risk assessment, but all five local Health & Social Care Trusts have undertaken to work to ensure measures are put in place to facilitate this as soon as possible.

The full guidance (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>) sets out the detailed guidance for each category of care.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health what strategies are in place to stop the transmission of HIV; and whether there is a target date for zero transmissions.

**(AQW 18345/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The international UNAIDS 95: 95: 95 HIV elimination strategy targets (1) the proportion of diagnosed individuals receiving treatment and (2) the proportion of those in treatment being virally suppressed have now been surpassed here. However, modelling suggests that the target for the proportion of individuals infected with HIV being aware of their diagnosis has not yet been reached. A target date for zero transmissions has not been set but my Department and the HSC aspire to ending new transmissions here at the earliest possible date.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health whether he has considered issuing guidance or regulations for people to holiday at home rather than travel abroad this summer.

**(AQW 18386/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Written Ministerial Statement on 13 May 2021 from the First Minister and deputy First Minister set out a further set of relaxations agreed by the Executive on 13 May 2021.

We have reviewed the 'Stay Local' messaging and concluded that with the reopening of tourism and other areas, it is time to step away from that message, to focus more on individuals' behaviours rather than distance travelled.

In relation to travel within the Common Travel Area (CTA), at present there is advice not to travel in or out of Northern Ireland except where it is essential to do so. The list of essential reasons to travel is published on NIDirect.

From 24 May, subject to review on 20 May, we have decided to remove the essential travel reasons requirement and retain the guidance on self-isolation and add two new exemptions to this:

- visits to family and friends;
- those who have completed mandatory managed quarantine on arrival at a point of entry elsewhere in the CTA and travelled directly to Northern Ireland.

Those exempt from self-isolation will be asked in guidance to take a pre-departure LFD test, and LFD tests and days 2 and 8 post arrival in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health, given the expected increase in medical graduates, what action he is taking to ensure an adequate number of foundation training places are available in the Health Service.

**(AQW 18388/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** I am aware of the significant increase that will be required to the future number of posts available under the Northern Ireland Foundation Programme, particularly from 2025 onwards. It will be necessary to address a temporary increase in medical graduates from the QUB Medical School, combined with the additional output that will be generated by Ulster University's new Graduate Entry Medical School.

My officials will be working with the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency and HSC Trusts to identify the necessary postings and additional finance. I expect that, working in partnership with these organisations, the Northern Ireland Foundation Programme will be expanded to provide new medical graduates with excellent foundation training opportunities that will launch their careers in the HSC.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health to detail the sickness absence of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in each month of the last three years.

**(AQW 18411/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The metric used to measure sickness absence is percentage hours lost. Information provided by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) on the percentage hours lost in each month due to sickness absence in each of the last three years is detailed in the table below. Figures exclude Covid-19 self-symptomatic and self-isolation related absence figures.

Month	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
April	9.7%	10.8%	6.8%
May	10.0%	10.5%	6.9%
June	13.1%	12.4%	7.9%
July	12.6%	12.1%	8.2%
August	11.5%	10.7%	9.2%
September	12.3%	10.0%	8.9%
October	11.1%	10.3%	8.9%
November	10.0%	9.9%	8.2%

Month	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
December	12.1%	11.1%	10.3%
January	11.8%	9.8%	7.7%
February	11.6%	10.0%	7.0%
March	12.2%	8.5%	5.8%

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health how many patients in each Health and Social Care Trust were (i) treated for; and (ii) diagnosed with (a) obesity; (b) poor oral health; and (c) type 2 Diabetes, in each of last three years.

**(AQW 18420/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Data is either not available, or the terms used in this question are too broad to allow appropriate data to be supplied in response.

The number of people diagnosed with obesity is not collected centrally. There are numerous possible treatments for obesity, including GP advice on diet and exercise, medication and bariatric surgery.

Poor oral health may refer to a wide range of conditions, including dental caries, gum disease and oral cancer, and it is not possible to provide either the number diagnosed with or treated for poor oral health.

Diabetes is one of the disease registers in the Quality and Outcomes Framework. Disease prevalence data collected as part of the QOF can be found at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/prevalence-statistics>. The diabetes register contains the number of patients aged 17 years and over with diabetes mellitus (specified as type 1 or type 2 diabetes). Although GP practices must record whether a patient has Type 1 or Type 2 diabetes, this level of detail is not collected centrally, therefore the register size cannot be disaggregated by type of diabetes. The number of people treated for Type 2 diabetes is also not available, as various treatments can be used. For example, treatment can be simply diet and exercise, but some people may require medication; treatment will vary depending on the individual needs.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health how many people who contracted COVID-19 have subsequently suffered a stroke.

**(AQW 18466/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** At this point, it is not known how many people who contracted COVID-19 have subsequently suffered a stroke. This is a complex issue that would require a significant data linkage project to address. Such projects may be dealt with in the appropriate research setting when full data becomes available.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health, over the last five years, how many Belfast Health and Social Care Trust rheumatology patients have paid for private treatment as a result of not receiving treatment from the Trust.

**(AQW 18468/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Information on the number of Belfast Health and Social Care Trust rheumatology patients that have paid for private treatment as a result of not receiving treatment from the Trust is not held by the Department, Health and Social Care Board nor the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health to detail the current waiting list for mental health services in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, broken down by (i) time spent on the waiting list; and (ii) age bracket.

**(AQW 18478/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Department does not hold this information centrally and it was requested from the Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT).

Table 1 sets out the number of active waits for mental health services in SHSCT, broken down by time bands.

Table 2 sets out the number of active waits for mental health services in SHSCT, broken down by age bands.

**Table 1: Number of active waits for mental health services in SHSCT, broken down by time bands, as at 31st March 2021.**

MH Service	0-3 Weeks	>3 to 6 weeks	>6 to 9 weeks	> 9 to 13 weeks	> 13 weeks	Total Waits
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service	138	73	56	12	0	279
Adult Mental Health	341	184	161	156	630	1,472
Dementia	47	48	44	30	336	505
Psychological Therapies	50	43	42	42	241	418
<b>Total</b>	<b>576</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>1,207</b>	<b>2,674</b>

**Source:** Southern Health and Social Care Trust

**Note:** Figures are taken from live administrative systems and are therefore subject to change.

**Table 2: Number of active waits for mental health services in the SHSCT, broken down by age bands, as at 31st March 2021.**

MH Service	0 - 17	18 - 64	65 +	Total Waits
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service	279	0	0	279
Adult Mental Health	6	1423	43	1,472
Dementia	0	2	503	505
Psychological Therapies	49	355	14	418
<b>Total</b>	<b>334</b>	<b>1,780</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>2,674</b>

**Source:** Southern Health and Social Care Trust

**Note:** Figures are taken from live administrative systems and are therefore subject to change.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health how the new visiting arrangements in health care settings will be implemented in (i) Diasy Hill Hospital, Newry; and (ii) Craigavon Area Hospital.

**(AQW 18479/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Full implementation of the new guidance will always be subject to dynamic risk assessment, but all five local Health & Social Care Trusts have undertaken to work to ensure measures are put in place to facilitate this as soon as possible.

The Southern Health & Social Care Trust has confirmed that for all their facilities they have been opening up to further patient visiting as of Wednesday 12th May. Visiting will be facilitated via a ward appointment system, to ensure social distancing can be safely managed. Visiting will take place in visiting slots over the period from 2pm to 8pm and will accommodate one nominated visitor at any given time.

There are a small number of areas with immunocompromised patients where visiting will be risk assessed and will need more carefully considered. This is purely on the basis of patient safety.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 17789/17-22, to detail the number of (i) nurses and (ii) midwives that have joined Health and Social Care Trusts in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 18486/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Information on the number of registered nurses and midwives joining Health and Social Care (HSC) organisations in each of the last five years is provided in the table below. The information presented has been calculated by comparing snapshots of directly employed HSC staff in post at 31 March each year, for example those who appeared on the March 2020 dataset but not March 2019 were classed as joiners in 2019/20. Not all joiners will be newly qualified, as some could be taking up employment in HSC organisations having left another part of the wider health & social care system e.g. general practice or nursing home care. Figures presented may exclude some short-term staff who were not captured on one or both datasets.

#### Registered Nursing & Midwifery Staff Joining HSC organisations in each year

Year	Registered Nurses	Registered Midwives
2015/16	1,054	55
2016/17	1,038	77
2017/18	1,061	69
2018/19	1,162	65
2019/20	1,393	70

**Source:** Human Resources, Payroll, Travel & Subsistence (HRPTS) system

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health how much each Health and Social Care Trust has spent on agency nursing staff in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 18487/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Trust expenditure on agency staff has been incurred to ensure that safe and effective services are sustained and contributes importantly to maintaining service provision to patients and clients. HSC Trusts employ locum staff for several reasons, for example, cover for sickness and maternity/paternity leave; cover for existing vacancies; and when demand

increases over the winter months. The primary aim of this is to ensure that safe and effective services are sustained at all times for patients and clients.

The Department monitors Health and Social Care Trusts' expenditure on agency staff on a quarterly basis for specific staffing categories, across financial years. Information is not collected by service area. Expenditure on Agency Staff by Health and Social Care Trust, for the last five financial years, is given below. The last available data, currently available, for a complete financial year is 19/20.

The Department is committed to sustained investment in growing the local nursing and midwifery workforce to meet ever increasing demands, for example, this year we have commissioned the highest ever number (1,325) of pre-registration nursing and midwifery training places.

#### Nursing and Midwifery Agency Expenditure

TRUST	Financial Year 15-16	Financial Year 18-19	Financial Year 18-19	Financial Year 18-19	Financial Year 19-20
BHSCT	£6,668,756	£9,467,147	£12,529,388	£19,231,230	£38,494,367
NHSCT	£3,297,233	£6,810,643	£9,153,695	£11,028,899	£15,375,590
SEHSCT	£2,047,749	£1,877,793	£3,144,583	£3,904,493	£5,695,567
SHSCT	£1,399,191	£2,423,601	£3,758,100	£10,843,948	£20,056,606
WHSCT	£2,391,544	£2,965,126	£3,571,683	£7,062,151	£10,157,845
NIAS	£0	£0	£5,440	£1,020	£0
<b>Total Spend</b>	<b>£15,804,473</b>	<b>£23,544,310</b>	<b>£32,162,889</b>	<b>£52,071,741</b>	<b>£89,779,974</b>

Source: HSC Trusts

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the estimated number of unpaid carers; (ii) the number of unpaid carers that would qualify for carers' allowance; (iii) the estimated savings from the work of unpaid carers; and (iv) a breakdown of the ages of those people cared for by unpaid carers.

(AQW 18488/17-22)

**Mr Swann:**

- (i) The 2011 Census showed that there were 213,863 people who indicated that they provided some level of unpaid care in Northern Ireland. We do not hold any data on the current numbers of people providing unpaid care;
- (ii) Carer's Allowance is administered and overseen by the Department of Communities;
- (iii) While UK-wide estimates of between £57 billion and £100 billion have been produced no independent NI research has been commissioned to account for local factors; and
- (iv) This information is not available.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health whether he has plans to investigate the adult learning disability underspend in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 18492/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** As per AQW 17202/17-22, 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.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has any plans for capital investment in the Glenside Day Centre, Strabane.

(AQW 18493/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** In 2017-18 the Western Health and Social Care Trust invested £400,000 in a modular redevelopment for Glenside Day Centre which has improved the delivery of services to clients. During 2020-21, the Trust commissioned a condition survey of all its built estate which has identified Glenside Day Centre to be of satisfactory standard.

There are no current plans for any capital works on this site in 2021-22.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health (i) for his assessment of neurology service provision; (ii) how his Department intends to address the waiting lists for this service; and (iii) for an update on the progress of reforming neurology services.

(AQW 18498/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I recognise that the Neurology Service is under considerable pressure. Challenges include the workforce, with demand greater than capacity at consultant level. Despite the best efforts of staff, outpatient waiting lists have grown in recent years. There is also a need to provide more timely assessment of patients who present at Emergency Departments with suspected neurological conditions.

In the immediate term, constraints on the workforce mean that innovative approaches are being developed involving nursing, allied health professionals and GPs working alongside consultant posts.

Alongside these developments, the Regional Review of Neurology Services is tasked with identifying the optimal configuration for the Neurology Service and the long term improvements required to deliver that configuration. While the Review was necessarily paused in March 2020 to enable resources to be redirected to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is intended that the Neurology Review Team will be reconvened in the coming weeks to progress this important work.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the increase in the number of out-of-hours hospital appointments created in the past year in order to deal with waiting lists; and (ii) any funding bids he has made to the Executive and Westminster in order to fund the tackling of growing waiting lists.

**(AQW 18549/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** It is normal practice for the HSC to schedule additional clinics out of hours to help address hospital waiting times for assessment. While the Covid-19 pandemic reduced the level of additional capacity which could be provided, there were still 8,982 outpatients seen out of hours during 2020/21.

My Department's only option to secure additional funding is through the Department of Finance (DoF) led Budget exercises which determines the budget allocations for NI Departments and are agreed by the Executive.

As part of the 2021/22 Budget Exercise, my Department in acknowledging the additional pressures placed on waiting lists which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic made a bid of £30.3m to DoF in respect of Elective Services.

While this bid for additional funding was not met specifically my Department did receive Covid Rebuild funding of which I intend to use some £40m to fund Waiting List Initiatives and other Elective developments including orthopaedics.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority inspections in each month since February 2020, broken down by (i) virtual or remote inspections; and (ii) on-site inspections.

**(AQW 18573/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The table below provides details of all RQIA inspections conducted during the period 01 February 2020 to 30 April 2021.

Month	On-Site	Remote	Blended*	Grand Total**
Feb-20	N/A	N/A	N/A	224
Mar-20	N/A	N/A	N/A	113
Apr-20	6	4	0	10
May-20	15	2	1	18
Jun-20	29	5	0	34
Jul-20	34	5	4	43
Aug-20	74	7	7	88
Sep-20	168	22	11	201
Oct-20	145	19	22	186
Nov-20	142	17	24	183
Dec-20	116	8	10	134
Jan-21	115	14	6	135
Feb-21	137	34	9	180
Mar-21	136	43	9	188
Apr-21 <sup>1</sup>	55	6	0	61
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1,172</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>1,798</b>

Please note: the figures in table above differ slightly from the figures provided in a previous response to AQWs 15475/17-21 and 15476/17-21, as the data have been subject to validation at year end.

1 April 2021 figures are provisional.

- \* Blended inspections involve elements of both remote and on-site inspection.
- \*\* From April 2020 onwards RQIA recorded inspections as onsite, remote or blended. No breakdown held for February or March 2020.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health how many (i) maternity services; (ii) general visiting services; and (iii) care homes are COVID-19 secure as per the definition in the visiting guidance.

**(AQW 18578/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The use of the term “COVID-19 Secure” relates to the delivery and organisation of visiting, and not to a specific setting. For a visit to be COVID-19 Secure, as described in the latest guidance, requires the maintenance of:

- A social distance of 2 metres wherever possible
- Optimal hand hygiene and personal hygiene measures
- Good ventilation
- Use of PPE when required
- Face Coverings

While there are specific issues in a small number of settings due to the size/layout of some of their facilities, all five Health & Social Care Trusts have committed to put the necessary measures in place to allow the implementation of the latest guidance as far as possible. Thus, subject to ongoing dynamic risk assessments, COVID-19 Secure visits should be facilitated for all those in healthcare settings in Northern Ireland.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Health (i) which Health and Social Care staff are due to receive the £500 special recognition payment; (ii) whether those working for private care employers are also eligible; (iii) in instances where staff choose the pattern of instalments, rather than a lump sum, how will it be paid and over how long and; and (iv) whether staff will be signposted to the independent advice sector or will independent advice be invited into workplaces.

**(AQW 18581/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:**

- i All HSC staff on the Business Service Organisation payroll – including doctors, community dentists and Agenda for Change staff.
- ii. Those working in the Independent Sector providing contracted and regulated services, such as in nursing homes, will also be eligible.
- iii. Staff will have the option of receiving the payment over 3 instalments.
- iv. Staff will be advised to seek appropriate advice independently, from, for example, Advice NI or Citizens Advice.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health what steps are being taken to reduce to waiting time for patients with Inflammatory Bowel Disease to receive a full diagnosis.

**(AQW 18593/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** A number of initiatives have been introduced in recent years to improve waiting times for inflammatory bowel diseases. Diagnosis of IBD is now supported by gastroenterology primary care pathways and the provision of laboratory tests, specifically Calprotectin testing. These have enabled clinicians to prioritise outpatient referrals for IBD and better manage patients who are already undergoing treatment for IBD. Dietitians also play a vital role in managing conditions such as Coeliac and IBS thereby freeing up consultant capacity within hospitals to see more patients with suspected IBD.

Bringing our waiting times to an acceptable level across all specialties is a long term collective effort requiring sustained and substantial investment and additional staffing. It is in that context that I recently announced my intention to publish an elective care framework which will set out both the immediate and longer term actions and funding requirements.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health how many Inflammatory Bowel Disease nurse specialists there are in each Health and Social Care Trust.

**(AQW 18594/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Information provided by Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts on the number of Inflammatory Bowel Disease nurse specialists employed is detailed in the table below.

HSC Trust	Inflammatory Bowel Disease Nurse Specialists
Belfast	3 (2.98 WTE)
Northern	3.6 WTE
South Eastern	2 (2 WTE)



HSC Trust	Inflammatory Bowel Disease Nurse Specialists
Southern	3 (3 WTE) *
Western	2 (1.5 WTE) #

\* A fourth person is currently employed providing temporary cover for one IBD Nurse Specialist.

# There is also 1 (0.45 WTE) vacant post.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health how many requests his Department received for the translation of documents into (i) Irish; and (ii) Ulster Scots, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18630/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department did not receive any requests for the translation of documents into either (i) Irish; or (ii) Ulster Scots, in each of the last three years.

**Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider the Holywell Hospital new build as the location for the new perinatal mental health 6 bed inpatient unit that is currently being developed.

**(AQW 18642/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Public Health Agency will shortly commence work to develop a business case for a regional mother and baby unit. This work will involve scoping the need for such a unit and possible locations.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the recruitment of a permanent Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18643/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The competition to appoint a permanent Mental Health Champion was advertised on 4 March 2021 and closed on 9 April.

Interviews are scheduled for June 2021 and I am planning to have a permanent Champion in post by early Autumn.

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Health what action he is taking to reduce waiting times for endometriosis.

**(AQW 18651/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The pandemic has inevitably had a negative impact across many aspects of elective surgery, including access to gynaecology 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.

Additional non-recurrent funding has been made available in 2021/22 to enable Trusts to undertake additional activity to reduce elective care waiting lists across a range of specialties. This funding has been targeted at those patients with the highest clinical priority, including those with suspected or confirmed cancer and thereafter at those waiting the longest for assessment and treatment.

Bringing our waiting lists to an acceptable level across a range of specialties, including endometriosis, is a long term collective effort requiring sustained and substantial investment and additional staffing. It is in that context that I recently announced my intention to publish an elective care framework which will set out both the immediate and longer term actions and funding requirements needed to tackle all waiting lists.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the (i) prevalence; and (ii) health impact of nitrous oxide use.

**(AQW 18653/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** There is currently no population-wide prevalence data related specifically to nitrous oxide use, as this substance is likely to fall within the wider category of solvents, with only isolated reports of nitrous oxide being used in NI. The Drug & Alcohol Monitoring & Information System (DAMIS) recently received information from partner agencies regarding a number of small, empty, branded gas type / nitrous oxide canisters being found in parts of Belfast. There has also been reports of associated anti-social behaviour from young people thought to be involved in inhalation of this substance as well as concerns about the dangers to their health.

Commonly associated with creating feelings of euphoria, nitrous oxide slows down the brain and body's responses and can cause severe headaches, dizziness, confusion, as well as short-lived but intense feelings of paranoia. It is very dangerous to inhale nitrous oxide directly from the canister or in an enclosed space is. The health risks from taking too much nitrous oxide include falling unconscious and/or suffocating from the lack of oxygen. Mixing nitrous oxide with alcohol is especially dangerous as it can increase the risks associated with both substances and can lead to an increased risk of accidents.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health when he will recommend that travel restrictions between Northern Ireland the rest of UK are lifted.

**(AQW 18661/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** People should not travel in or out of Northern Ireland except where it is essential to do so.

If you are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area and you plan to remain here for at least 24 hours, public health advice is that you should self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days, unless you are exempt.

Some people travelling within the Common Travel Area may be exempt from self-isolation due to the job they do. Information on sector specific exemptions is available at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-travel-within-common-travel-area-sector-exemptions>

An indicative date of 24 May has been set to allow individuals to travel within the Common Travel Area to visit family and friends.

This means you will not have to self-isolate for 10 days if you are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area to visit family or friends, however the public health advice is to take a pre-departure Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test, and then a LFD test on day 2 and day 8 post arrival in NI.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is monitoring the connection between breastfeeding and deprivation.

**(AQW 18667/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department monitors breastfeeding and inequalities as reported in the PHA Breastfeeding Briefing 2020. Full details can be found at: [https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2020-05/Hi%20Brief%20Breastfeeding%20February%202020%20FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2020-05/Hi%20Brief%20Breastfeeding%20February%202020%20FINAL_0.pdf)

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of children awaiting assessment for autism in each Health and Social Care Trust; and what plans he is putting in place to reduce those waiting lists.

**(AQW 18674/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The number of children awaiting an assessment for autism, following a referral, in each Health and Social Care Trust are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The number of children in Northern Ireland waiting for an autism assessment following referral by Health and Social Trust (31 March 2021)

HSC Trust	Number of children waiting for assessment following referral by time waiting
Belfast	1,866
Northern	1,880
South Eastern	70
Southern	179
Western	1,129
Northern Ireland	5,124

**Source:** Autism Waiting Times (Children) return, Health and Social Care Board

Whilst autism assessments are operational matters for individual Trusts, I acknowledge that the extensive waiting times are presenting challenges for the families involved. In recognition of this I have recently published an interim autism strategy, which will work towards implementing an integrated and streamlined pathway of care for children and young people across the region and will place emphasis on the need for early intervention approaches and support to meet the needs of individuals and their families and carers.

My officials are in discussions with colleagues in the Health and Social Care sector to identify factors which are contributing to delays in assessment and the actions being taken to address them. This will further inform actions to be progressed within both the interim autism strategy and the future direction of a longer term strategy work on which will commence later this year.

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to reduce the current 18 month waiting list for ear wax removal in South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

**(AQW 18679/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The pandemic has had an inevitable and serious impact on already unacceptable waiting times.

All patients referred for possible treatment are assessed by a local consultant to determine their clinical priority. Generally, this assessment will establish whether the patient's treatment need should be considered as "urgent" or "routine".

Due to the constraint in resources and the increasing demand for services, the Trust has to prioritise the capacity for the most clinically urgent patients. This regrettably means those other patients, who are considered less urgent, may have to wait longer for their assessment and treatment.

Bringing our waiting lists to an acceptable level across a range of specialties, including ENT, is a long term collective effort requiring sustained and substantial investment and additional staffing.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health whether he will bring forward a maternity service strategy.  
(AQW 18690/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** I can confirm that the Department still intends to commence a review of Maternity and Neonatal Services and following the review to develop an updated Maternity Strategy. Unfortunately the review had to be paused due to the challenges and disruption associated with COVID-19.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health to detail the hourly rate paid to domiciliary care workers in each Health and Social Care Trust.  
(AQW 18692/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The hourly rates paid to domiciliary care workers are outlined in the table below. Trusts utilise a mix of Band 2 and Band 3 staff, the Banding of posts is a matter of the responsibilities of a particular role, not the job title. The pay rates are in line with nationally agreed Agenda for Change Terms and Conditions pay scales, last updated in April 2020. The pay round for 2021/22 is yet to be settled.

Band	Pay Point (under current system)	Hourly Rate
Band 2	1	£9.21
	2	£9.21
	3	£9.89
	4	£9.89
	5	£9.89
	6	£9.89
	7	£9.89
	8	£9.89
Band 3	1	£10.09
	2	£10.09
	3	£10.81
	4	£10.81
	5	£10.81
	6	£10.81
	7	£10.81

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health whether he will establish a regional pay rate for domiciliary care workers.  
(AQW 18693/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** The hourly rates paid to domiciliary care workers are outlined in the table below. Trusts utilise a mix of Band 2 and Band 3 staff, the Banding of posts is a matter of the responsibilities of a particular role, not the job title. The pay rates are in line with nationally agreed Agenda for Change Terms and Conditions pay scales, last updated in April 2020. The pay round for 2021/22 is yet to be settled.

Band	Pay Point (under current system)	Hourly Rate
Band 2	1	£9.21
	2	£9.21
	3	£9.89
	4	£9.89
	5	£9.89
	6	£9.89
	7	£9.89
	8	£9.89
Band 3	1	£10.09
	2	£10.09
	3	£10.81
	4	£10.81
	5	£10.81
	6	£10.81
	7	£10.81

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Health, given the Health and Social Care Census found that a third of the midwifery workforce are aged over 50 in March 2020, (i) how his Department will ensure capability and capacity in the workforce; and (ii) when interim reports will be published on the capacity and capability within midwifery, including on progress towards an adequate level.

**(AQW 18739/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** In line with recommendations of the Nursing and Midwifery Task Group, my Department is committed to stabilising the midwifery and nursing workforce, therefore ensuring safe and effective care. The recommendations commit to developing and preparing midwives and nurses for leadership positions, through the development of a new leadership framework and investment in leadership training for midwives and nurses.

The Department is committed to investing recurrently within postgraduate education, which will increase the capacity and capability of the midwifery workforce, supporting the development of a strategic workforce plan which will systematically enhance the roles of midwives within maternity services.

To further maintain workforce capacity, the Department has been investing in pre-registration midwifery training places commissioned from the Queen's University, Belfast. These have increased by 106 (166%), from 64 in 2015/16 to 170 in 2021/22.

The Department does not intend to publish interim reports on the capacity and capability within midwifery. The implementation of the Nursing and Midwifery Task Report recommendations will strengthen the capacity and capability of the midwifery workforce.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health to detail the average waiting time for someone with suspected rheumatoid arthritis to get a first appointment with a consultant in each Health and Social Care Trust.

**(AQW 18768/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Outpatient waiting times are reported by my Department on a quarterly basis. These publications refer to the position at the end of a given quarter, detailing how many patients are still waiting for a first consultant led outpatient appointment broken down by HSC Trust, Specialty and length of time waiting.

Quarterly National Statistics on Outpatient Waiting Times Information is published at the following link:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/outpatient-waiting-times>

Data on waiting times for someone with suspected rheumatoid arthritis to get a first appointment with a consultant is not available. Table 1 shows the average length of time that patients have been waiting for a first Rheumatology outpatient appointment in each HSC Trust at 31st December 2020.

Table 1: Number of patients waiting and average waiting time for a first Rheumatology outpatient appointment as at 31st December 2020

HSC Trust	Number waiting	Average waiting time (weeks)
Belfast	5,090	126
Northern	2,754	71
South Eastern	4,005	100
Southern	2,112	80
Western	2,042	60

**Source:** DOH Outpatient Waiting Times Dataset

**Note:** Average weeks waiting refers to how long, on average, patients had waited as at 31st December 2020, and not the total average time that patients will wait.

**Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Health whether he will meet with beneficiaries of La Dolce Vita Project that have been affected by domestic abuse and parental alienation and who may also be in a position to support early intervention plans on policy and potential advice on practical guidance for professionals.

**(AQW 18771/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Officials from my Department and the Department of Justice have engaged with La Dolce Vita Project to discuss the topic of parental alienation and work which both Departments will be taking forward through a Private Family Law Early Resolution Joint Action Plan. My Department would welcome the support by key stakeholder organisations, like La Dolce Vita Project, to implement the plan.

**Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Health when the first meeting will take place on the focus/task and finish groups to be held on the early intervention plans to support policies in connection to parental alienation; and how will the organisations be selected for these focus/task and finish groups.

**(AQW 18772/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Officials from my Department and the Department of Justice have engaged with a range of stakeholders to discuss the topic of parental alienation and work which both Departments will be taking forward through a Private Family Law Early Resolution Joint Action Plan. These stakeholders have been identified due to the nature of their work with people who have lived experience of the behaviours associated with parental alienation. This engagement will continue as the plan is implemented.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Health to detail attendance figures at Emergency Departments in each Health and Social Care Trust in each month since January 2020.

**(AQW 18777/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Information on the number of monthly attendances at each Emergency Department is published on a quarterly basis and available to view or download at the link below:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hs-niwts-ecwt-data-q4-20-21.html>

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to outline the membership and terms of reference for the Autism Forum; and for a breakdown of the forum membership.

**(AQW 18779/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Invitations to nominate an individual for the Autism Forum issued to twenty one organisations, of which nine accepted as follows:

- National Autistic Society
- Orchardville
- Autism NI
- Mencap
- NOW Group
- Autism Initiatives
- Barnardo's
- ARC (an umbrella organisation representing the learning disability sector)
- Cedar Foundation

Members nominated to the Forum are comprised of people with lived experience and representatives of the organisation. A number of nominees have dual membership as both. Representatives from the Health and Social Care sector and a cross-departmental representative will also participate in the Forum. Membership will be reviewed as required.

Terms of reference will be agreed at the next meeting of the Forum in June and will be based upon communication, shared experience, informing priorities and accountability.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to amend the StopCOVID NI app to display a person's vaccination status.

**(AQW 18792/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The StopCOVIDNI app was created to reduce the likelihood of onward transmission of the virus by alerting people to the possibility of having been in close contact with a person who subsequently tested positive for Covid. The app was built with privacy in mind and specifically designed not to hold personal information.

The StopCOVIDNI app would not be suitable for the purpose of displaying personal vaccination status.

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Health what actions are being taken to introduce fair pay for nursing.

**(AQW 18832/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The pay round for 2021/22 for NHS and HSC staff has not yet been finalised.

Any decision on a pay award for nurses and other NI health workers, will be taken after the pay review bodies make their recommendations. I do not intend to pre-empt those recommendations. The NHS Pay Review Body is now expected to publish its report in 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.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Health whether the drug Translarna will be available on the Health Service until January 2023, as is the case in England.

**(AQW 18842/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Highly specialised technologies recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) are available to all suitable patients in Northern Ireland within the parameters set by NICE.

Ataluren (Translarna) for treating Duchenne muscular dystrophy (HST3) was recommended for use by NICE in July 2016. The managed access agreement for ataluren has been extended to January 2023.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of access to the drug Translarna for Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

**(AQW 18870/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Highly specialised technologies recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) are available to all suitable patients in Northern Ireland within the parameters set by NICE.

Ataluren (Translarna) for treating Duchenne muscular dystrophy (HST3) was recommended for use by NICE in July 2016.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of the numbers of children diagnosed with autism in each Health and Social Care Trust, for each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18964/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My department publishes statistics for the number of children diagnosed with autism in each Health and Social Care Trust on a quarterly basis. This information is available on the Department website at the following link: <http://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/autism-statistics> .

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health whether there are any plans to offer the vaccine to people in the 12-16 age group and specifically to those who are clinically extremely vulnerable, such as those with serious lung conditions.

**(AQW 19056/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Throughout the planning and rollout of the Northern Ireland Covid-19 Vaccination Programme we have been guided by JCVI.

On the issue of vaccinating those aged 12 and over, we would again be guided by JCVI. At this point in the vaccination programme, JCVI have not recommended the vaccination of children. In addition, the two vaccines currently available are not authorised for use with children although MHRA do keep this position under review.

**Dr Aiken** asked the Minister of Health whether he made a specific bid for funding to address waiting lists during the 2021/2022 budget exercise.

**(AQO 2066/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** In acknowledging the additional pressures placed on waiting lists which has been exacerbated by Covid-19 my Department made a bid of £30.3m to the Department of Finance as part of the 2021/22 Budget Exercise in respect of Elective Services.

While this bid for additional funding was unfortunately not met I intend to use some £40m of Covid rebuilding funding to fund Waiting List Initiatives and other Elective developments including orthopaedics.

**Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Health, following recent safety concerns about the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine for people under the age of 30 years, how his Department will encourage uptake of the COVID-19 vaccines among younger people.  
**(AQO 2067/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Mr Speaker, as Members will be aware, following further advice from JCVI, all persons under 40, as opposed to under 30, it is preferable if they receive an alternative vaccine to the AstraZeneca where possible. This will be accommodated via the Trust vaccination centres which will now provide the Pfizer vaccine to those under 40 years of age.

Anyone aged 40 or over can still receive the AstraZeneca vaccine and they can book their appointments at the SSE Arena vaccination centre or at any of the 349 participating community pharmacies.

Close to a million people in Northern Ireland have received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and AstraZeneca was and continues to be essential in the roll out of our program.

The JCVI's updated advice relates to reports of extremely rare adverse events of concurrent thrombosis (blood clots) and thrombocytopenia (low platelet count) following vaccination with the first dose of AstraZeneca vaccine. The JCVI has updated its risk/benefit advice in relation to age groups, following a review of the current low incidence of disease and current and projected availability of alternative vaccines. In light of these factors, the Pfizer vaccine is now the preferred vaccine for under 40's, when available.

The JCVI has made clear there have been no safety concerns identified for thrombosis/thrombocytopenia associated with the second dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine and advises those who have received their first dose of AstraZeneca, no matter what age they are, should also receive the second dose where they have not had an extreme adverse reaction to the first dose. This will further increase the levels of protection offered and help our society emerge prudently from lockdown.

Vaccine uptake to date in Northern Ireland has been very good with almost 1 million people having received at least one dose and it is essential this momentum is maintained as we move to younger age cohorts. We all want to get back to normal life and protect our loved ones.

To encourage vaccine uptake a mass media campaign 'Every vaccination brings us closer, together' was launched on Monday 10 May and will run until mid-June on TV, radio, outdoor and digital platforms. The campaign aims to encourage anyone not already vaccinated to take up their invitation.

A key message within the campaign is even if you don't think you need the COVID-19 vaccination it will help protect you and those close to you. Qualitative testing undertaken by PHA indicated getting back to normal and protecting loved ones were motivating factors that would encourage uptake of the vaccine in the under 30 age group.

Alongside the advertising campaign, messaging is regularly going out on social media and other free channels including messaging on pregnancy, fertility and vaccine safety.

In addition to monitoring uptake of the vaccine the PHA will commission quantitative research to track and monitor public knowledge and attitudes regarding the vaccine and measure campaign awareness and response to the campaign.

We are aware that even before the programme has opened to those under 30, over 52k people in that age bracket have been vaccinated as part of other cohorts, such as HCWs, CEV or carers etc. I am confident the young people of Northern Ireland will play their part in protecting themselves, their loved ones and help society return to normal.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of concerns reported by constituents that in-person GP services have become increasingly difficult to access.  
**(AQO 2068/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** I am aware of the narrative, as indicated again in this question, that GP services are becoming increasingly difficult to access. Let me be clear – evidence shows that is not the case.

The most recent figures from two weeks ago shows that in that particular week there were 164,137 consultations. That is a rate of 82 per 1,000 patients. Almost 40% of these were face to face.

The pre-covid consultation rate was 86 per 1,000 patients and 50% face to face. So that shows the number of consultations, and the proportion of those which are face to face, are only very slightly reduced.

General Practice has changed the way it works in responding to the current pandemic and despite the demands and capacity limits that COVID has created, GPs have maintained all of the core elements of general practice services.

The GP practice telephone first triage system introduced at the start of the pandemic allows patients to continue to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required.

Technologies such as video conferencing and enabling patients to send photographs by text has helped to facilitate diagnosis and ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential.

GP practices are open and are providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them. If the Member has concerns about any particular practice then of course I would urge him to write to my Department immediately. I am assured that the vast majority of our general practitioners are working diligently, albeit under ever increasing stresses and pressures.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of eating disorder services, including waiting times.  
**(AQO 2069/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Every Trust has a specialised community based Eating Disorder Service for both young people and adults. Services for young people are based within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Teams and the Adult Eating Disorder Service within Adult Mental Health and Learning Disability Services.

Inpatient services for young people with an eating disorder are based in Beechcroft Hospital, Belfast Trust and inpatient services for adults with an eating disorder are based in local Trust Mental Health Acute Inpatient Units.

Although each Trust's Eating Disorder Service exists independently, CAMHS and Adult Eating Disorder Services are part of a regional group known as the Regional Eating Disorder Network Group (REDNG). REDNG includes clinicians and senior managers from all Trust Eating Disorder Teams, Health and Social Care Board, Public Health Agency and Service User representation from the Eating Disorder Association.

REDNG ensures local developments are coherent and standardised as far as possible. Their role is to promote the uniformity of approaches to patients across Trusts and share best practice and learning from service developments.

All Trusts work to the same regional 'You in Mind Eating Disorder Care Pathway (2015)' which uses a stepped model of care, commissioned to deal with the severe, enduring, and treatment resistant cases of Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and associated atypical eating disorders. Depending upon an individual's assessed need, HSC Trusts offer a range of care and treatment options which are evidence based and ensure that the right care is delivered at the right time, in the right place by the best professionals to meet those needs. Services can range from targeted prevention, early intervention and supported self-help, specialist physical and mental health services, specialist eating disorder services, to highly intensive mental health services, which are usually intensive daily support and hospital based care.

The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) also oversees a regional contract delivered by the Eating Disorder Association (EDA). The objectives of this service are to provide support, information and advice. This consists of a telephone helpline service, the use of electronic media (website and email), a drop in centre based in the greater Belfast area and signposting for Health and Social Care professionals.

As part of this contract, EDA also provide services to both the Belfast Trust and South Eastern Trust catchment areas. Services include awareness raising programmes, delivered to schools youth clubs and other community settings and local Support Groups.

Each of the Trusts aim to assess urgent referrals within one week and routine referrals are accessed within 9 weeks. This target is normally met within CAMHS, where there have only been 7 breaches of the 9 week target over the past 2 years. This is not the case for waiting times within Adult Mental Health, where on average 17 people per month over the last 2 years have had to wait longer than 9 weeks to access eating disorder services.

I fully appreciate that every patient should be able to avail of the best treatment that the health service can provide, and in a timely manner. It is regrettable that any patient has to wait longer than they should for assessment, diagnosis or treatment and I fully understand the distress and anxiety caused by longer waiting times.

I am acutely aware that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected people with eating disorders. In general, more of the most vulnerable people in our society are currently unwell and those with eating disorders have, unfortunately, experienced more challenges than others and many are now more unwell than normal.

It is vital therefore that proper consideration is given to the future of eating disorder services. Action 9.2 of the Mental Health Action Plan contains a commitment to review specialist mental health services including ensuring that we provide better services for those people diagnosed with eating disorders.

Options for improving eating disorder service provision across Northern Ireland have been examined by HSCB through the Regional Eating Disorders Network Group.

I have approved the strategic policy direction for future eating disorder services flowing from the REDNG review and this will be reflected in the Mental Health Strategy 2021-31, which I intend to publish in the summer.

This will be a significant first step in improving mental health services for Northern Ireland and ensuring that those with eating disorders get the care and treatment they need.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health for an update on his Department's work to improve outcomes for people with endometriosis.  
**(AQO 2070/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The waiting times for diagnosis and treatment of endometriosis are unacceptable.

My Department endorsed the NICE guideline on the treatment and diagnosis of endometriosis in October 2017.



The Public Health Agency is leading on the development of a designated NI digital platform for pain management aimed at people living with chronic pain, including those with endometriosis.

Furthermore, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is already an accredited British Society for Gynaecological Endoscopy Endometriosis Centre and the Western Trust is working towards accreditation. Both Trusts have also appointed endometriosis specialist nurses.

Importantly, the Belfast Trust also intends to submit a full business case this year for a Regional Endometriosis Centre. My Department will then consider it through normal processes. Approval will of course be contingent on available funding being made available, but I would share the view of most within this house that it should be taken forward with high priority.

**Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Health to provide an update on plans to provide GP-led Multi-Disciplinary Teams in health centres west of the Bann.

**(AQO 2071/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Primary Care Multi-disciplinary Teams 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.

Like many transformation projects the expansion of the programme has been affected by the Covid pandemic. However the MDT model is already fully implemented in the Down GP Federation and is currently in development in 5 other areas across Northern Ireland – Derry/Londonderry, West Belfast, Causeway, Newry & District and North Down & Ards. Of these, the Derry GP Federation is the largest in Northern Ireland, and significant progress in implementing the model in that area is making a real difference to those in the North West.

My Department and the HSCB are currently engaged in a process to develop a 'road map' for the implementation of MDTs across all remaining GP Federations. This involves engaging with those in general practice and HSC Trusts across Northern Ireland to agree realistic and achievable proposals, which will then be aligned with overall strategic priorities and current or emerging pressures.

Development of the road map is expected to be completed before summer 2021, and will enable robust planning around the cost and timescale for the rollout of the model to the remainder of Northern Ireland.

Further rollout of the model is however dependent on the availability of a suitably qualified and experienced workforce, readiness of accommodation and the appropriate funding.

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to increase the number of intensive care beds.

**(AQO 2072/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** As a region, Northern Ireland has a funded capacity of 72 critical care beds with flexibility to scale up capacity as required in response to additional demand, for example, during the flu season.

Robust escalation plans have been in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Critical Care Network for Northern Ireland (CCaNNI) developed a critical care surge plan, which was updated in advance of the third surge and provided the ability to flex critical care capacity to an absolute maximum of 177 ICU beds across the region. CCaNNI continues to manage, monitor and review critical care capacity for the region.

My Department will continue to monitor the trajectory of the virus and will not hesitate to recommend measures again should they be required to protect HSC. 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.

The key limiting factor on the HSC system comes not from a lack of bed space but from pressures on staff resources, such as nursing staff. For example, to increase critical care beds by 15, requires more than 100 additional nurses. In order to open these beds, nurses therefore have to be redeployed from other parts of the HSC, with a severe impact on other activity.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the current waiting times for speech and language therapy for children.

**(AQO 2073/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Firstly, I would wish to clarify that my Department only holds general waiting list information for speech and language therapy patients, it is not age specific.

Therefore, I can advise that the total number of people, of all ages, waiting for speech and language therapy, as at 31st March 2021, is 5,742 people. Of these, there are 2,454 people who have been waiting longer than the target of 13 weeks.

As Minister of Health I understand fully the very important role speech and language therapy services play in addressing the wide and varied range of challenges experienced by children with speech, language, and communication difficulties.

The figures that I have quoted should be taken in the context of the sheer scope of service users who require the help of our hard-working Speech and Language Therapists. Emerging evidence suggests a high level of need for Speech and Language Therapists working with people with speech, language and communication difficulties.

As well as children's services, Speech and Language Therapists are providing support and working right across a wide range of services such as those for dementia, psychosis, schizophrenia, stroke, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and adult learning disability.

Our Speech and Language Therapists therefore play a significant role in the fields of social, emotional and mental health. They are important, integral parts of multi-disciplinary teams supporting people with mental health issues.

In respect of children's services, I can advise members that the Speech and Language Therapy Service has continued to provide their face-to-face service to children in Special Schools and Special Educational Needs units.

During the pandemic, other children in the community have been given the opportunity to avail of alternative methods to access this therapy, such as by telephone or by virtual means. Depending on each child's individual needs, face-to-face sessions have been offered and carried out in homes and schools.

Going forward, as we rebuild services, the full range of those innovative methods developed during the pandemic will continue to be utilised and their ongoing application should positively impact on waiting times for Speech and Language Therapy.

I am acutely aware of the considerable challenges which are being experienced by individuals and families who are awaiting Speech and Language appointments. However, I must remind the Member that this is not a situation that is unique to Speech and Language Therapy.

In fact, as recently as Tuesday 13 April, I made an oral statement to this House in which I described our 'absolutely dire waiting lists'

I said then that the pandemic had highlighted fragilities in our health and social care system and I acknowledge that yet another example of these fragilities is being highlighted today.

I said in my statement on 13 April that we must put waiting lists right – and this must include waiting lists for Speech and Language Therapy.

**Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Health to outline what work is being carried out to address high levels of respiratory disease in deprived communities.

**(AQO 2074/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Respiratory disease refers to a wide range of illnesses that can be acute or chronic. Many, though not all, respiratory conditions are preventable and it is important to acknowledge that there are a range of factors that can influence respiratory health.

Reducing inequalities in health generally is a huge challenge. It needs sustained collaboration across departments and agencies, local government, the community and voluntary sector, and with communities themselves to address the factors which impact on health and wellbeing locally and regionally.

Making Life Better (MLB) 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 continue to work together on a range of issues, including mitigating the impacts of poverty and tackling the conditions that create health inequalities.

In terms of lifestyle factors, one of the most significant impacts on respiratory health is from tobacco use. 17% of the Northern Ireland population currently smoke. Sadly, smoking prevalence in the most deprived areas is more than two and a half times that in the least deprived areas. Disadvantaged people who smoke are a priority group in the Department's tobacco control strategy and actions in the accompanying implementation plan are aimed at reducing smoking prevalence amongst this group. Many smoking cessation services are available within or near socially and economically disadvantaged communities. The Public Health Agency works with Healthy Living Centres to ensure Stop Smoking services are delivered in a community setting at times and locations which suit local people.

In recent months, much of the focus has been on the specific respiratory impact of COVID-19. In recognition of the higher infection rates and poorer outcomes amongst those in the most deprived areas, the Test Trace Protect Contact Tracing service operated by the PHA also seeks to provide advice and support to those who need additional help and to help to people to isolate as required when they have a positive test.

Unfortunately not all respiratory disease is preventable and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) commissions respiratory care in both acute and community settings across the whole of Northern Ireland as part of the overall Service and Budget Agreements with each of the Health and Social Care Trusts.

In primary care, GPs have an important role to play in the management of respiratory conditions. The Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF) sets out a number of clinical indicators and guidance to support the treatment and care of patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and Asthma. Practices can also participate in a Northern Ireland Local Enhanced Service (NILES) for Chronic Respiratory Conditions. This builds on the QOF and seeks to contribute to both reducing pressure on secondary care and improving the long-term health and well-being of patients with Asthma and COPD.

**Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Cancer Recovery Plan.

**(AQO 2075/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had a devastating impact on cancer services and I understand the worry and concern that long waiting times cause for both patients and their families.

I am committed to dealing with this problem and to this end I'm currently finalising a Cancer Recovery Plan, 'Building Back; Rebuilding Better'.

The plan is fully aligned with the short term recommendations of the Cancer Strategy, and will set the direction of travel for the next 10 years; the Cancer Recovery plan will focus on the initial 3 year period of the strategy – from now until 2024.

The recommendations in the cancer recovery plan have been co-produced with the Health and Social Care Board and colleagues from across the Health Trusts and cover 11 key areas throughout the cancer journey - from awareness and early detection through to palliative and end of life care.

In addition, I have introduced a grant scheme using COVID-19 funding of £10.7 million. This funding will afford cancer charities the opportunity to bid under a number of criteria which are aligned with recommendations in the cancer recovery plan. The grant will be available and managed through Community Foundation NI.

While work on the Cancer Strategy had been delayed by the response to the pandemic, it has continued to progress well. Indeed it is nearing the end of its development and will have a 12 week public consultation period through the summer of 2021; during that time the public will have the opportunity to review the strategy and put forward their views.

## Department for Infrastructure

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's role and responsibilities concerning the Ulster Canal Greenway project.

**(AQW 18216/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** The Ulster Canal Greenway Project is funded under the Sustainable Transport Thematic Objective of the INTERREG VA Programme. My Department, together with the South's Department of Transport, fulfils the role of Accountable Department for the Thematic Objective and is one of five NI Accountable Departments for the Programme.

My Department is responsible for the regularity, propriety and value for money for the applications/projects to the INTERREG VA programme within the Sustainable Transport Thematic Objective. In the case of the Ulster Canal Greenway project, my Department provides funding to SEUPB for the project, based on project expenditure forecasts, as detailed in the Terms and Conditions of Grant to enable payments to be made to the project partners.

The proposed Phase 2 of the Ulster Canal greenway stops short of Middletown village at Annagola Bridge, where a footway link to the village is to be constructed by my Department.

Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council has put forward a separate proposal to extend the greenway beyond where it ends at Annagola Bridge. This would enable easier access to the village of Middletown from the GAA pitch, for walking, wheeling and cycling. My Department wrote to all Councils in September 2020 asking them to develop business cases for their proposals (including this proposal) with a view to securing capital grant funding.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the actions her Department will commit to with regards to rural development.

**(AQW 18285/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Since taking office last year, I have been clear that my priorities include addressing regional imbalance, better connecting communities and, importantly, ensuring that we shape our places around our people, for our people and with our people. This is particularly important when considering the infrastructure associated with rural development. Our rural areas, including our towns and villages, have a key role to play in supporting economic growth and rural renaissance.

Connectivity is a key issue for these areas and I recognise the important role that the strategic road network, public transport and community transport play.

My department is currently delivering two schemes on the A6 and I am committed to the delivery of the A5. In addition, in June last year, I announced my commitment to fund the continued development of a number of Strategic Road Improvement schemes. All of these schemes will assist rural development by helping to tackle regional imbalance, improving the economy, job prospects and prosperity, connecting communities and improving road safety.

Recognising the historic under investment in our roads, in 2020-21, I allocated £12 million to a Roads Recovery Fund, £10 million of which was directed towards rural roads across the North. These improvements have targeted many short lengths of roads that are in particularly poor condition and it is estimated that over 750 locations on the rural road network will benefit from these improvements. I am committed to the continuation of a rural roads fund.

As well as improving our public transport network and delivering an extensive programme of new and extended Park & Ride facilities, I will continue to provide funding, via the Rural Transport Fund, to Rural Community Transport Partnerships to deliver the Dial a Lift service which enables some of the most vulnerable within our rural communities to access local

goods and services. I have also provided additional in-year capital funding recognising the financial challenges as a result of COVID-19. This will all help to ensure the long term viability of the Partnerships.

I recognise the massive untapped potential that rail has to deliver multiple benefits across our island and have announced, in conjunction with the Transport Minister, Eamon Ryan TD, an All Island Strategic Rail Review. This review will allow us to consider our rail network and determine how we can improve it, or if appropriate expand it, for everyone.

NI Water is investing approximately £10.5m in its 6 year PC21 Rural Wastewater Improvement Programme and will support economic Article 76 Watermain Extensions to support new development in rural areas. Developers are encouraged to contact NI Water as early as possible regarding potential water and wastewater needs by making use of NI Water's Pre-Development Enquiry (PDE) service.

I am committed to changing the way we live for the better, providing safe routes that give people the freedom and confidence to walk, wheel and cycle as part of their everyday routine. Building a better future that delivers more for our citizens, socially and economically, is a priority as well as delivering cleaner, greener and healthier communities, as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. I have provided funding to support Councils in the construction of greenway schemes across Northern Ireland and I am keen to provide further capital funding, through my Blue Green Infrastructure Fund, to work with Departments, Councils and partners to support a broad range of interventions, including in rural areas.

Our navigable waterways, such as the Shannon Erne Waterway, Erne System and Lower Bann, also make an important contribution to the development of our rural communities.

My Department has lead responsibility for the Rathlin Island Policy and Action Plan and continues to work with the island community to ensure that our only offshore island continues to grow and prosper from within.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether the Driver and Vehicle Agency will hire additional driving examiners to help address the test backlog; and (ii) to provide the rationale for any decision on this issue.  
**(AQW 18373/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Following the Executive's decision on 15 April to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place.

The 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 before the end of May. The DVA is also currently progressing an external recruitment competition for 10 new full-time driving examiners. These measures will significantly increase the number of driving examiners that are available to deliver driving tests to help meet the increased demand for this service.

Following the phased reopening of the practical driving test booking service based on the expiry dates of theory test pass certificates, to give priority to those who have been waiting the longest time, I am pleased to confirm that the booking service for practical driving tests opened for all customers on 10 May 2021, providing everyone with a valid theory test pass certificate with equal opportunity to book a driving test.

The DVA has, and continues, to work hard to increase its capacity to help meet the expected high demand for driving tests. In addition to the recruitment of additional examiners the DVA has taken a range of measures to maximise the availability of test slots, including 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 from now until the end of August and bookings for September and October have been released 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 to detail (i) what process there is for critical workers to access driving tests as soon as possible; and (ii) who is defined as a critical worker.  
**(AQW 18374/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Following the Executive's decision on 15 April 2021 to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place.

The DVA has received a number of requests from key workers requesting that they reinstate a priority service for them to avail of early appointments. The DVA is working with the Department of Health on priority applications. However, those priority applications are restricted to key workers whose jobs are ancillary to medical, health or social care services and who need to drive for their work. If a critical worker meets these requirements, their employer must contact the DVA and identify staff in these priority groups. The DVA will then try to facilitate priority appointments for both theory and practical driving tests. The DVA is not in a position to consider any applications that do not meet the above criteria.

I am pleased to confirm that the booking service for practical driving tests opened for all customers on 10 May 2021, providing everyone with a valid theory test pass certificate with equal opportunity to book a driving test.

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 from now until the end of August and bookings for September and October have been released to accommodate more learners.

Driver theory testing has resumed at the six established test centres, with additional slots at each location and extended opening hours being provided 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, however, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times and I would ask customers for their continued patience.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's work in relation to vehicle testing to become more aligned with the 26 counties.

**(AQW 18375/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Progress on this issue has been delayed due to the impact of Covid-19 and the priority which was given to financial support schemes. However, I intend to issue a Call for Evidence on biennial vehicle testing by the end of June to consider a range of factors including the potential impact on the automotive industry in the North. Any subsequent introduction of biennial vehicle testing would require the development of primary legislation which would not be deliverable within the current Assembly mandate.

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to provide details of the legislation her Department has requested The Executive Office to submit to the Business Committee for timetabling; and (ii) when was it requested.

**(AQW 18415/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department currently has no requests with the Executive Office for legislation to be timetabled with the Business Committee.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she is considering a residential parking plan for Belfast.

**(AQW 18433/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** You will be aware that a Residents' Parking Scheme has been in operation in your South Belfast constituency since April 2018, in the Rugby Road and College Park Avenue area. This was the first such scheme to begin operation in Northern Ireland.

My Department is currently developing a new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) which will address future plans for roads, public transport and active travel within the five councils whose spatial area falls within the Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area (BMUA).

The BMTP will be developed in conjunction with each Council's Local Development Plan (LDP) Local Policies Plan and will include the joint preparation of a Parking Strategy. This will consider the provision, management and operation of on and off street parking throughout the City of Belfast and in towns within the neighbouring councils, and will potentially include options for Residents Parking Schemes. Work on the next phase of the BMTP is ongoing, and I am determined that the Transport Plan for Belfast will deliver reduced levels of commuting by private car and greater use of sustainable modes of transport including public transport, walking and cycling.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration she has given, for a limited period, to ensuring all but dangerous parking infringements are not issued with tickets as local commercial town centres reopen after lockdown.

**(AQW 18499/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am very aware that the management and operation of the road network has a wide range of impacts across businesses, communities and the environment. I am also aware that the COVID19 pandemic has placed town centres in general, and commercial businesses in particular, under considerable pressure.

In response to the latest Covid-19 lockdown, Parking Enforcement was scaled back in line with road usage from the end of January 2021. A small team of Traffic Attendants (TAs) were retained to be deployed to those locations where they could contribute most to road safety and traffic progression. However now that traffic levels are increasing it is necessary for more TAs to be brought back from furlough to help keep our roads and streets safe.

The enforcement of parking restrictions, either time bound or charged, deters all day parking in town centres and facilitates customer access to businesses, by encouraging an ongoing turnover of parking spaces. The enforcement of restrictions is also important in encouraging the use of dedicated carparks, creating better places for people and reducing the number of cars circulating and seeking on-street spaces.

Selective enforcement for dangerous parking infringements only is unlikely to be a benefit to businesses, as it would encourage drivers to park for longer periods reducing the availability of spaces. Incentivising drivers to use their cars to access town centres also counters efforts being made by the Department to persuade people to use public transport and other sustainable modes of transport.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there is a register or a planned register for the flora and fauna on the Comber Greenway.

**(AQW 18501/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not maintain a register of flora and fauna on the Comber Greenway and there are currently no plans to introduce such a register.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the planned road maintenance programme for East Belfast over the next twelve months.

**(AQW 18503/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I can assure the Member that I want to do more to improve the condition of the road network for all road users and support the need for investment in roads infrastructure to help address regional imbalance, help communities and improve safety.

Whilst the 2021-22 budget for Eastern Division has yet to be confirmed, I can confirm that a provisional list of schemes is being developed across all programmes for delivery during the 2021-22 financial year. Once agreed, details of the structural maintenance programme will be included in the Spring Council reports which will, in due course, be presented to Belfast City Council before being made publically available online.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many potholes have been repaired, broken down by constituency, during the the 2020-21 financial year.

**(AQW 18527/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not maintain records by constituency area; however, the following table provides details of the number of carriageway, hard shoulder and layby surface defects (which includes potholes, cracking, depressions etc.) that have been repaired from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, by DfI Roads Section Office area:

<b>DfI Roads Section</b>	<b>Surface Defects Repaired (1 Apr 2020 - 31 Mar 2021)</b>
Antrim & Newtownabbey	5261
Ards & North Down	3500
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon - East	5929
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon - West	5031
Belfast North	1785
Belfast South	2388
Lisburn & Castlereagh	5124
Causeway Coast & Glens - East	2368
Causeway Coast & Glens - West	5445
Fermanagh & Omagh East	3439
Fermanagh & Omagh West	5778
Londonderry & Strabane	6343
Mid & East Antrim	6956
Mid Ulster North	7905
Mid Ulster South	3843
Newry, Mourne & Down - East	5110
Newry, Mourne & Down - West	6150

It is important to note that there can be a time lag between when a repair is carried out and the associated records are updated on my Department's maintenance management system, particularly in the current circumstances. As a result, the figures supplied for the number of repaired defects in 2020/21 may increase as records are updated.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many roads have been resurfaced, broken down by constituency, during the the 2020-21 financial year.

**(AQW 18528/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not maintain records by constituency however the table below provides details by Council area of the number of road resurfacing schemes that have been carried out from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021:

<b>Council Area</b>	<b>Number of Carriageway Resurfacing Schemes 1 Apr 2020 – 31 Mar 2021</b>
Antrim and Newtownabbey	15
Ards and North Down	20
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	32
Belfast	43
Lisburn and Castlereagh	17
Causeway Coast and Glens	70
Fermanagh and Omagh	49
Derry City and Strabane	33
Mid and East Antrim	22
Mid Ulster	50
Newry, Mourne and Down	20

It is important to note that the number of resurfacing schemes alone does not give a complete picture of the improvements that have been delivered in any area, as the type of work undertaken and length/area of resurfacing will vary across schemes. Some resurfacing schemes may improve relatively short lengths of road in poor condition whereas other schemes may be for much longer lengths or involve full reconstruction of the road.

Information on the locations where resurfacing schemes have been completed will be included in the forthcoming DfI Roads' spring reports to Councils. As well as providing a list of resurfacing schemes that were completed in 2020/21, the reports will also include details of the resurfacing programmes for the current 2021/22 financial year.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many footpaths have been resurfaced, broken down by constituency, during the the 2020-21 financial year.

**(AQW 18529/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not maintain records by constituency; however, the table below provides details by Council area of the number of footway resurfacing schemes that have been carried out from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021:

<b>Council Area</b>	<b>Number of Footway Resurfacing Schemes * 1 Apr 2020 – 31 Mar 2021</b>
Antrim & Newtownabbey	9
Ards & North Down	20
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	15
Belfast	18
Lisburn and Castlereagh	4
Causeway Coast and Glens	61
Fermanagh and Omagh	17
Derry City and Strabane	19
Mid and East Antrim	30
Mid Ulster	15
Newry, Mourne and Down	29

- \* The number of footways resurfaced includes footways that were resurfaced as part of wider carriageway resurfacing schemes

It is important to note that the number of resurfacing schemes alone does not give a complete picture of the improvements that have been delivered in any area, as the type of work undertaken and length and area of resurfacing will vary across schemes. Some resurfacing schemes may improve relatively short lengths of footway in poor condition whereas other schemes may be for much longer lengths or involve full reconstruction of the footway.

Information on the location of completed resurfacing schemes can be found in the forthcoming DfI Roads' spring reports to Councils. These reports will provide a list of resurfacing schemes completed in the 2020/21 year as well as a forward looking programme of resurfacing work for the 2021/22 financial year.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she is going to hold major telecommunications companies, such as BT and Virgin media, accountable for the sub-standard work they are carrying out on footpaths across Bangor and Donaghadee. (AQW 18530/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** As I have explained in my previous answers to questions on this subject, under the Streetworks legislation utility companies have a legal right to place and maintain their services in the footway and carriageway and are required to adhere to certain standards, including in respect of reinstatements.

While it is acknowledged the ongoing utility work may have impact on the visual appearance of the footways, they remain serviceable and safe for users.

My Department will continue to carry out checks on the reinstatements undertaken by all the utilities and identify any areas which fall outside the agreed standards. Any safety issues which are identified will be notified to the relevant utility for remedial action.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when will she publish the public consultation on the fixed penalty notice for careless driving. (AQW 18532/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** Work is underway on drafting proposals for a consultation that will consider making careless driving a fixed penalty notice offence and this consultation will be issued as soon as possible. I have met with the Chief Constable to discuss progress on the issue as well as a number of other road safety policy and legislation areas.

Court referrals for every level of careless driving offence is resource intensive for the justice system. I am therefore committed to working with the Justice Minister and the PSNI to determine the best way forward.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a timeline for the introduction of Operation Snap. (AQW 18534/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** Implementation of Operation SNAP in Northern Ireland will require amendment of existing road traffic legislation so that the existing offence of careless driving can be discharged by means of a fixed penalty. The introduction of a new disposal option requires public consultation and work is underway on drafting proposals which will be issued as soon as possible for consultation.

The submission of dash cam footage, obtained safely and appropriately, will have significant benefits for road traffic law enforcement here. Therefore, I recently discussed this issue with the Chief Constable and we will be ensuring that progress is made in this area.

The actual timeline for introducing Operation Snap in Northern Ireland will be for the Department of Justice and PSNI to decide following a fixed penalty disposal option becoming available. For my part, I will ensure the legislative process moves forward as quickly as is possible.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she is considering a greater role for elected officials within the Road Safety Partnership. (AQW 18535/17-22)

**Ms Mallon:** I am very supportive of the work carried out by the Road Safety Partnership. The Partnership Board members include senior representatives from the Department of Justice, The Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service, the Northern Ireland Policing Board. Officials from my Department also attend in an advisory capacity.

I have recently met with the Chief Constable and we discussed the Road Safety Partnership. The Department of Justice is the lead partner in the Road Safety Partnership and my department is a supporting delivery partner.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the spend on awareness raising and educational road safety measures last year; and (ii) the projected spend for this year. (AQW 18536/17-22)



**Ms Mallon:** During the 2020/21 financial year my Department's spend on raising awareness and education on road safety was £1,981,623.87. The breakdown of budget spend was:

Road Safety Awareness Raising (through campaign advertising, etc.)	£1,410,124.82
Road Safety Grant Scheme	£ 80,806.64
Road Safety Education	£ 490,692.41

Projected budget allocations for 2021/22 are not yet available.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to detail the current budget for upgrading the Limavady sewer network; and (ii) as a result, what works will be carried out in the next financial year.

**(AQW 18546/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:**

- (i) In terms of the budget for upgrading the Limavady sewer network, NI Water has advised me the budget required for upgrading the Limavady sewer network, contained within NI Water's £2 billion business plan for the period 2021 to 2027 (PC21), is ca£5 million. Funding of the PC21 Final Determination, which was published on 13 May 2021, is subject to the appropriate funding being made available to my Department and NI Water by the NI Executive.
- (ii) NI Water initiated early survey work in March 2021, which is scheduled for completion during the 2021 school summer holiday period. The Limavady sewer catchment model will then be updated, and provided to NIEA for their assessment and development of a Statement of Need. Following this, NI Water will develop detailed designs to address NIEA's Statement of Need requirements, with a view to construction commencing by 2023.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 14724/17-22, to detail the measures that were taken by her Department prior to local government reform to comply with the law on the retention and disposal of public records in respect of (i) pre-1973 minerals planning application files; (ii) the old planning register maps where pre-1973 planning applications were physically plotted; and (iii) where these documents are currently stored.

**(AQW 18582/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As you will be aware my Department was formed in May 2016 and the Department of the Environment (NI) would have been responsible for the retention and disposal of records prior to local government reform in 2015. Retention and disposal of public records prior to local government reform would have been carried out in accordance with the retention and disposal schedules applicable to the Department of the Environment during that period. I should point out, there is a distinction between the retention and disposal of records and the requirement to maintain a public register of planning decisions. This register is required to be kept by each planning authority and any held by DoE(NI) prior to local government reform have been transferred to the appropriate local council.

A request for an extract from this register should in the first instance, be made to the relevant council. Pre 1973 planning applications would have transferred to councils when planning functions transferred in 2015. I am however, informed that the referencing system for files has changed several times and understand that a search for historical files can present difficulties.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what landscaping and planting will take place once the flood alleviation scheme on Prince William Road, Lisburn is complete.

**(AQW 18591/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As you may be aware I recently announced a new flood alleviation scheme along the Flushbridge Stream in the Prince William Road area of Lisburn. This £900,000 scheme consists of the installation of approximately 850 meters of new culverts to increase the capacity of the drainage network and improve protection from flooding to approximately 100 properties. The works are currently due to be completed in the autumn of this year.

A landscaping and planting schedule has been designed for the scheme which aims to utilise native species of grasses, shrubs and trees to create a vibrant space following completion of the works. Areas which have been cleared to facilitate works will be reinstated with a similar planting type and density as they had previously.

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to list all of the current undischarged road bonds in Strangford.

**(AQW 18611/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not hold a list of undischarged road bonds by constituency however my officials have produced a list of all current undischarged road bonds in Ards & North Down and Newry Mourne & Down council areas. This list has been extracted from my Department's Private Streets Database and has been placed in the Assembly library. Details of the current undischarged road bonds in the Strangford constituency area can be extracted from this list.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how utility companies are held to account regarding the quality of reinstatement work to the public highway following repairs to their equipment.

**(AQW 18636/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Utility companies are responsible for permanent reinstatement of roads to an agreed specification. While they usually engage contractors to carry out works on their behalf, the utility company is ultimately responsible for the reinstatement of the street. Where a utility company does not reinstate a road in a satisfactory manner, the Department applies its procedures for inspection of reinstatements and for dealing with reinstatement failures as set out in the Northern Ireland Road Authority and Utilities Committee (NIRAUC) Code of Practice for Inspections.

When a utility company fails to carry out the reinstatement to an acceptable standard, the utility company responsible for the repair or replacement is duly notified. Where necessary, additional inspections are then carried out by my officials, at the utility company's expense, to confirm that any defects identified have been corrected.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether all new developments are required to implement sewer and storm water separation.

**(AQW 18669/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Under Article 161 of the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, there is a requirement for developers to enter into agreements for adoption of all sewers serving two or more properties. Article 161 agreements state that the developer must construct all sewers in accordance with Sewers for Adoption NI Edition 1, which requires separate foul and surface water sewer systems to be provided. Developers must construct the sewerage in accordance with the terms of the agreement in order to have the sewers adopted by NI Water.

Additionally, officials in the Department of Finance have advised that Part N (Drainage) of the building regulations provides for separate drainage systems for foul water and rainwater from a building to the point where they meet a sewer or other specified point of disposal.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 18085/17-22, to detail the specific areas where development has been constrained in East Antrim by problems with water infrastructure.

**(AQW 18670/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** NI Water is a statutory consultee on planning decisions and provides information on issues such as water quality, sewerage and drainage infrastructure, including Waste water Treatment Works (WwTW) and network capacity. It has advised me that development in East Antrim is not being constrained by its drinking water infrastructure.

NI Water does not receive notification from planning authorities on the reasons for planning refusals. Local Councils, as the Planning Authority for the majority of planning applications, would be best placed to provide this information.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 18018/17-22, whether any studies have ever been completed to electrify any part of the Northern Ireland railway network.

**(AQW 18671/17-22)**

**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. I also 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 the all-island economy, improving the ability of people to connect with and access opportunities and addressing regional imbalance.

To date, there has been no studies completed in relation to the electrification of any part of the Northern Ireland railway network. However 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 and builds on 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 the decarbonisation of our rail network across the island of Ireland.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 18085/17-22, to provide further detail for each of the areas, except for Larne, where problems have been identified.

**(AQW 18672/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** NI Water has advised that, of the Waste water Treatment Works (WwTW) located in the East Antrim constituency area (excluding Larne WwTW), the Mullaghboy WwTW is currently operating above its design capacity.

In the Whitehead, Ballystrudder, Ballycarry, Tully Road (Carnlough and Glenarm), Cushendall and Cushendun areas, issues relate to the sewers nearing capacity. In these areas developers should engage with NI Water's Developer Services Solution Engineering Team, which will conduct more detailed analysis of the wastewater system and, if required, investigate potential developer led solutions to address capacity issues.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the full dualling of the Larne line has been considered as part of the future of the Northern Ireland railway network.

**(AQW 18673/17-22)**

**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. I also 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 the all-island economy, improving the ability of people to connect with and access opportunities.

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. Last month I was delighted to announce with Transport Minister, Eamon Ryan TD, an All Island Strategic Rail Review. This review will allow us to consider our rail 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, Minister Ryan and I are keen that we use this opportunity to consider how we can improve our rail network across all areas of the island of Ireland. This Review will consider our rail infrastructure to Larne.

My Department is also currently preparing a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will set out my priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks to 2035. I expect to publish the Draft RSTNTP for consultation towards the end of this year and I would welcome your input into improving rail infrastructure and services across Northern Ireland including Larne.

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the anticipated abandonment order for Conway Square will be made.

**(AQW 18681/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** A review of the records held by my Department would indicate that no formal application for Abandonment has been made in respect of Conway Square and consequently there is no Abandonment process currently being taken forward by my Department.

I can advise that should a formal application be made it generally takes between 6 and 18 months for the Abandonment process to complete with factors affecting the timeline being the nature and complexity of the application and whether or not any objections are received during the consultation process.

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to list the roads in the Strangford constituency that have had a road bond for (i) one year; (ii) two years; (iii) three years; and (iv) more than three years, specifying the number of years for those more than three years.

**(AQW 18683/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not maintain information by constituency area and unfortunately the information you have requested is not readily available or accessible from my Department's Private Streets Database.

However officials have produced a list from my Department's Private Streets Database which includes all current undischarged road bonds for the Ards & North Down and Newry Mourne & Down council areas. This list is placed in the Assembly library and the roads in the Strangford constituency with a road bond can be identified from it. Providing the additional information requested would require officials to identify and then analyse each road bond separately in order to categorise each one in the format requested and unfortunately this labour intensive exercise could not be justified.

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the unadopted roads in the Strangford constituency with an outstanding road bond, where the houses have been occupied for more than one year.

**(AQW 18684/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not collate or record information relating to the dates on which houses are occupied nor do we maintain information by constituency. However my officials have produced a list of all current unadopted roads with an outstanding road bond in the Ards & North Down and Newry, Mourne & Down council areas which has been extracted from my Department's Private Streets Database and this list is placed in the Assembly library. The roads in the Strangford constituency with an outstanding road bond can be identified from this list.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department or local councils would be responsible for authorising the redevelopment of the Barry's Amusements in Portrush into residential or tourist accommodation.

**(AQW 18688/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Under the Planning (Development Management) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 planning applications for development are categorised in accordance with the hierarchy of development and as laid out in the Schedule to the regulations.

A potential planning application for the re-development of Barry's Amusements in Portrush into residential or tourist accommodation would be categorised in accordance with the hierarchy of development as local or major development, depending upon the threshold or criteria met, and in either case would be the responsibility of the relevant council to process

and determine. In this instance this would be Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, as the local planning authority for the area.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to detail the qualifications needed to become a driving test examiner; and (ii) whether all examiners are trained to the same standard.

**(AQW 18703/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** There are two pathways to becoming a driving examiner. The first pathway is through internal recruitment from within the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) from the existing pool of staff in the technical and administrative grades.

The second pathway is for new entrants to the Northern Ireland Civil Service. For applicants on this pathway, the educational qualifications required are, GCE 'A' level passes in 2 separate subjects, GCSE/GCE (O' level) at grade C or above in both English and Maths. Applications will also be considered from applicants with relevant formal qualifications considered by the selection panel to be of an equivalent or higher standard to those stated.

Applicants must be at least 23 years old and have a valid full Category B car driving licence for at least 3 years which enables them to drive in the UK. The applicant should not have more than 3 penalty points or have been disqualified from driving in the last four years, which is the same requirement for internal recruitment.

For new entrants to the NICS there is a five stage process

- Stage 1 – An online aptitude test
- Stage 2 – An eligibility sift
- Stage 3 – An interview
- Stage 4 – A special practical driving test
- Stage 5 – A four week formal assessment course

Existing DVA staff have to complete Stages 2, 4 and 5. It is only when all these criteria have been met that the applicant be offered a post as a driving examiner.

My officials in the DVA have confirmed that all staff are trained to the standards set out in Directive 2006/126/EC, commonly referred to as the 3rd EU Directive.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many car parking spaces her Department owns for use by staff; (ii) how many of those are available to staff for free; (iii) whether her Department has plans to reduce the number of staff car parking spaces; and (iv) how many spaces have provision for electric vehicle charging.

**(AQW 18716/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:**

- (i) My Department (including the DVA) owns 1,283 car parking spaces for use by staff. Of these parking spaces 37% are shared with customers.
- (ii) There is no charge to staff or customers for use of these car parking spaces.
- (iii) At present, there are no plans to reduce the number of staff car parking spaces owned by the Department.
- (iv) There are two spaces owned by the Department with provision for electric vehicle charging.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department plans to reduce the bureaucracy for planning applications at local councils.

**(AQW 18728/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department is working closely with key stakeholders in a number of ways to improve processes, increase efficiency and where possible, reduce bureaucracy around the planning system. A review of the implementation of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 is underway which will provide an opportunity to consider any improvements which may be required to the way in which the Planning Act has been commenced and implemented in subordinate legislation. Work is also ongoing with statutory consultees through a cross government Planning Forum to improve processes around statutory consultation. In addition, my Department as part of a collaborative project with 10 councils, will be delivering a new Planning IT system next year which will improve the submission and processing of planning applications.

It is considered that the outcome of all of this work will assist in reducing elements of unnecessary bureaucratic processes within the planning system and my Department will continue to seek continuous improvement in this regard.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department had a service level agreement with BT Open Reach in relation to the quality of work on footpaths in Bangor.

**(AQW 18732/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As explained previously, under Streetworks legislation utility companies have a legal right to place and maintain their apparatus in the footway and carriageway but in doing so are required to adhere to certain standards, including in respect of reinstatements.

The Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 is the basis for the approved code of practice which sets out the reinstatement standards for openings in roads and footways across Northern Ireland and consequently there is no requirement for a service level agreement.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what is the current bond rate for adopting roads during developments; and (ii) what is the proposed increase being brought forward by her Department's officials.  
**(AQW 18733/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:**

- (i) I fully acknowledge the importance of developers entering into an Agreement with my Department to provide roads and footways to an adoptable standard in new developments, and that this is properly secured by a road bond.

My Department calculates the value of each road bond using construction rates and quantities, which reflects the cost to my Department of bringing the development road up to a standard that can be adopted, should the developer fail to do so.

- (ii) My officials are presently undertaking a fresh exercise to review the rates used to calculate road bonds to ensure they fully reflect the cost of constructing development roads. This review is likely to involve local stakeholders in the construction industry and surety providers and final decisions around any need for change will follow.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 18016/17-22, to outline what action is being undertaken to reduce collisions at the locations detailed.  
**(AQW 18749/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As stated in my previous response, my Department routinely reviews collision cluster sites to identify locations where it may be possible to reduce the number and severity of collisions by seeking to address specific collision types with appropriate road safety engineering measures.

I am advised that remedial measures are implemented at cluster sites when considered appropriate to do so, an example being at the A8/Pound Street junction in Larne where specific traffic management measures were implemented to address poor lane discipline and potential ambiguity in relation to road markings. This scheme has proven to be particularly beneficial in reducing targeted collisions from 8 collisions in a three year period to 3 collisions in subsequent years.

I can confirm that options for collision remedial measures were also being considered at the Doagh Road/Monkstown Road junction but as a recently approved planning application includes provision for an upgrade of this junction, it was decided not to proceed with works at this time. At the remaining sites identified in my previous response, due to the varied nature and differing causation factors of collisions, it has not been possible to identify a specific problem that might be addressed through implementation of engineering measures.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 18187/17-22, to define the term independent in the context of the answer.  
**(AQW 18774/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My previous answer referred to the requirement for councils to submit their development plan documents to the Department for independent examination. An independent examination is a public examination commenced, conducted and concluded by an independent examiner to determine if the development plan document is sound. This is an impartial, external examination by a party other than the council, or Department and is carried out by the Planning Appeals Commission or a person appointed by the Department.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 18187/17-22, how value for money can be demonstrated using the above system when preparing local development plans.  
**(AQW 18775/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Under the two-tier planning system councils have primary responsibility for local plan making.

Local Development Plans are important documents that will guide the future use of land in their respective areas and inform developers, the general public, communities, government, public bodies and other interested parties of the policy framework that is used to determine development proposals. They are a fundamental tool in the implementation of central government policies and strategic objectives.

All councils have been actively progressing their plans under this process undertaking a soundness based approach which is mirrored in other jurisdictions, and reliant on up to date and robust evidence.

My previous answer referred to the requirement for councils to submit their development plan documents to the Department for independent examination. DfI have a role as a statutory consultee in the process as well as an oversight responsibility, however the remit to consider value for money within this process is something for each individual council.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 18187/17-22 and specifically how councils are able to develop their own approaches to dealing with the specific economic, social and environmental local circumstances which affect communities in their areas, through the preparation of their local development plans, when these plans must strictly follow the instructions contained in the departmental Strategic Planning Policy Statements.

**(AQW 18776/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) was published in September 2015 following agreement of the Executive. It provides an overarching statement of the general planning principles underlying the planning system and provides a robust planning policy framework within which councils will prepare local development plans (LDPs) and also manage development. The provisions of the SPPS apply to the whole of Northern Ireland and must be taken into account in the preparation of LDPs which are key documents to furthering of sustainable development and implementing the SPPS.

In the preparation of LDPs, councils may develop local policy responses to their specific social, environmental and economic circumstances, albeit within the context of the strategic policy direction provided by the SPPS.

A key feature of the new LDP process requires development plan documents to be tested for 'soundness', based upon three categories which relate to how the plan has been produced; the alignment of the plan with regional and strategic policy and guidance; and, the coherence, consistency and effectiveness of the content of the plan.

**Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when resurfacing works will be carried out on the Portglenone Road, Randalstown.

**(AQW 18783/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** In addition to our routine cyclical maintenance process, my Department also delivers an annual programme of reconstruction and resurfacing works which is implemented on a scheme priority basis and reflects availability of funding. While resurfacing programmes for 2021-22 have not yet been finalised, I am pleased to be able to advise that Portglenone Road, Randalstown is currently included within our provisional programme however, before any resurfacing work can take place some essential enabling works need to be completed. The enabling works, which include side strengthening and drainage works, are currently planned for the 2021/22 financial year with subsequent programming of resurfacing works depending on availability of funding.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Infrastructure following concerns regarding road safety being raised by parents and carers of children at St Joseph's Convent School, whether she will carry out a traffic calming assessment on (Upper) Catherine Street, Newry.

**(AQW 18786/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I have asked my officials to carry out an assessment of Catherine Street to determine if any additional safety measures are warranted.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the recommendation in the 2019 Audit report on structural maintenance of the road network for her Department to look at providing more fairer coverage of rural roads within the structural maintenance budget, whether she will increase investment in rural roads within her structural maintenance budget in this financial year.

**(AQW 18787/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department is committed to delivering the best possible services with the funds available. In response to the NIAO recommendation to which you refer, arrangements are in place to agree an annual budget for resurfacing on the Trunk Road network, the objective of which is to maintain its condition while also maximising the budget for non-trunk roads, including rural roads.

I recognise that there has been historical under-investment in our road network for a significant number of years and that many rural roads are in need of repairs. In response, I allocated £12m of my 2020-21 Capital budget to a Roads Recovery Fund, of which £10m was specifically directed towards rural roads. These improvements have targeted many short lengths of rural roads that were in particularly poor condition.

I am currently considering my capital allocations for 2021-22, however, I remain committed to setting up a further Roads Recovery Fund from the available 2021-22 Budget to continue delivering this important work to improve connectivity and help rural communities. It is also worth noting that the rural road network, both Trunk and Non-Trunk, makes up around 78% of the total road network in the North and it is therefore inevitable that a significant proportion of the overall budget allocated for Structural Maintenance will be targeted towards the rural road network.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to when Covid restrictions relax to permit people to meet indoors, whether she will change the rules for the Strangford Ferry to permit school children and other foot passengers to use the passenger shelter on each of the ferries.

**(AQW 18817/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** School children and other foot passengers are already allowed to use the passenger compartments on both ferries, but in line with guidance they are expected to social distance.

I can assure you that our approach will continue to be reviewed as the Covid-19 regulations and guidance are updated.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many bus and coach operators were able to access her Department's sector specific support fund.

**(AQW 18871/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** All eligible bus and coach Operators that held a valid Northern Ireland bus operator licence and had suffered a significant adverse impact on income arising from the loss of business due to the Coronavirus Restrictions and met the requirements of the schemes were able to access my Department's financial assistance schemes.

Out of 140 applications for the first bus operator financial assistance scheme, 105 were eligible for financial assistance. Applications continue to be processed for the second scheme.

The main reason for ineligibility for the first Bus Operator Financial Assistance Scheme is that some operators are still profitmaking, despite a decline in business. However, as the scheme has been set up to provide funding only when losses have been incurred, it has been successful in providing targeted help to those most in need and in ensuring value for money.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will provide further support to the bus and coach sector moving forward, particularly for those smaller companies that had difficulties with previous schemes.

**(AQW 18872/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My current priority is implementing the second financial support scheme for bus and coach operators. While my officials and I will continue to work with the sector to monitor the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on operators, the Executive will need to consider how support and funding will be taken forward for all areas of the economy for 2021/22.

Both financial assistance schemes I have brought forward to support bus operators have been set up to provide funding, irrespective of the size of the business. As the schemes provide support only when losses have been incurred, they provide targeted help to those most in need and therefore ensure value for money

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has undertaken a Transport Study to identify problems and solutions for the improvement of traffic flow through Donaghadee.

**(AQW 18874/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As you are aware, there is currently a considerable amount of work being undertaken by utility companies within Donaghadee and in addition a large housing development of approximately 390 units is being constructed on the Newtownards Road. The combination of these projects would appear to have been significant contributory factors in the recent traffic delays being experienced.

I can confirm that my Department currently has no plans to undertake a traffic study of Donaghadee; however I have asked my officials to monitor traffic flows following completion of these works and if at that stage traffic progression issues are evident, a traffic study may then be considered.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how a Tree Preservation Order can be removed by (i) her Department; or (ii) by a local council.

**(AQW 18928/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:**

- (i) The Department (DfI) has the power to remove any Tree Preservation Order under the powers conferred by section 124(1) (Power for Department to make tree preservation orders) of Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011;
- (ii) Councils do not currently have the power to remove Tree Preservation Orders.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 14100/17/22, (i) whether the proposal to divert the watercourse adjacent to the new park and ride facility on lands 60m north of 92 Glenshane Road, Derry featured in the original proposals for the A6 strategic road; and (ii) where the details of the diversion can be found in the referred environmental statement.

**(AQW 18930/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The proposal to divert the watercourse adjacent to the park and ride facility at Drumahoe was assessed as part of the A6 Derry to Dungiven Environmental Statement that was published in December 2011.

The watercourse diversion is included as reference WD-10A in the Environmental Statement Volume 1 Chapter 16 under the description of Sub-Catchment SC-07. It is also shown in Environmental Statement Volume 2 Part C and Volume 3 Part B Figure 16.4 (Sheet 7).

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans Translink has to increase the number of bus journeys from Bangor to the Ulster Hospital, Dundonald.

**(AQW 18942/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Whilst demand for all bus services remain constantly under review to allow for adherence to social distancing, Translink has outlined that it is not experiencing any increase in customer demand from Bangor to the Ulster Hospital and, in that regard, there are no current plans to increase service levels.

**Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an explanation and the rationale for the placement of cameras in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area in respect of planning applications (a) LA10/2019/1386/F; and (b) LA11/2019/1000/F; and (ii) whether the local community was consulted in relation to the decision to install these cameras. **(AQW 18963/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The Department had no prior knowledge or role in the placement of cameras. This matter was first brought to DfI's attention by a local councillor and in following this contact up, it is the Department's understanding that the purpose of the erection of these cameras was to carry out traffic surveys to assist with the preparation of an Environment Statement which is proposed to be submitted to accompany planning applications LA10/2019/1386/F and LA11/2019/1000/F.

My Department also understands that there was not engagement with the local community prior to the erection of these cameras.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider Finaghy Primary School for inclusion in the 20mph zones at schools scheme. **(AQW 19065/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I was pleased to have been able to commit funding within my capital budget towards the introduction of part-time 20mph speed limits at 103 schools across Northern Ireland, so that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from school on a daily basis. Priority listings have been developed for each Roads Division based on scores calculated using the assessment framework contained within my Department's current road safety at schools policy document.

Given the restricted budgets for works of this nature, as well as the practicalities of delivery, it was necessary to limit the number of schools to around 100 in last year's programme. Unfortunately, based on its assessment score, Finaghy Primary School was not ranked as highly as the other schools included within last year's programme. However, it is my intention to take forward further tranches of part-time speed limits at schools and I can confirm that Finaghy Primary School will be considered for inclusion in future programmes, the scale of which will be dependent on the funding available.

## Department of Justice

**Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Justice what action is being taken by her Department in partnership with mobile phone network providers and internet providers to prevent scams through mobile phone messages and emails. **(AQW 18333/17-22)**

**Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice):** My Department works to tackle the issue of scams by supporting and contributing funding to initiatives of the Scamwise NI Partnership which was established in November 2016.

The Partnership is chaired by the PSNI and involves over 40 partners working collaboratively to raise awareness of scams. Partners include the Department of Justice, NI Policing Board, Trading Standards NI, the Consumer Council, the Commissioner for Older People, representatives from the retail and banking sector including Royal Mail and the Post Office and a number of faith and youth groups.

There are many different types of scams including phone, online doorstep and postal. The most prevalent are undertaken online or by telephone. I am pleased therefore, that Ofcom, the Communications Regulator, joined the Partnership at the start of this year. They will assist the Partnership in working more closely with mobile phone network operators and internet providers to prevent scams. I understand that Ofcom, supported by the telecommunications industry, is currently leading on work to transition the UK telephone network to Voice Over Internet Protocol technology (VOIP) by 2025. This will enable a technical solution to prevent number 'spoofing' where a caller impersonates another number. This method of 'spoofing' caller numbers is frequently seen in Northern Ireland and used to impersonate banks and utilities to obtain personal financial details or other sensitive information.

The Scamwise Partnership undertakes a range of awareness raising activities and has developed resources for all age groups. These include: a Scamwise Champion initiative aimed at young people through youth organisations and schools which highlights a wide range of scams including phishing; a series of video clips mainly for use on social media and a series of books on scams. One of these books is 'The Little Book of Cyber Scams' which was developed jointly by the Scamwise NI Partnership and The PSNI Cyber Security Centre. It provides details of various methods of phishing and outlines steps that can be taken to prevent them.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Justice (i) for her assessment of police numbers in the Causeway Coast and Glens area; and (ii) to detail what conversations she has had with the Chief Constable regarding this issue. **(AQW 18408/17-22)**



**Mrs Long:** Decisions relating to the deployment of police officers, including to the Causeway Coast and Glens area, are ultimately an operational matter for the Chief Constable of the PSNI, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB). I have not spoken with the Chief Constable specifically about police officer numbers in the Causeway Coast and Glens area.

I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the NIPB.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department has made any approaches to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in relation to the transfer of land for the provision of sporting facilities at Newforge Lane.

**(AQW 18481/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** My Department has made no approaches to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in relation to the transfer of land for the provision of sporting facilities at Newforge Lane.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice when is it anticipated that the fees legislation for diversionary courses as an alternative to a fixed penalty will come into being.

**(AQW 18533/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The Protection of the Police and Public, Courts and Sentencing Bill is currently at Committee Stage at Westminster and will need to work its way through the parliamentary process.

The Bill includes provisions relating to certain devolved matters that engage the Legislative Consent Motion process. These include 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 for promoting road safety. It will come into effect, if and, when legislation is approved by Parliament and the Assembly.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the work of the Organised Crime Taskforce's Cross Border Fuel Fraud Enforcement Group.

**(AQW 18587/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) is the strategic forum for delivering a coordinated response to tackling organised crime in Northern Ireland. The OCTF is supported by thematic sub groups focusing on distinct areas of organised crime. The sub group themes are reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure the focus remains on priority areas of work.

The OCTF has established a new sub group which is currently focussing on organised crime in relation to the UK's exit from the European Union. A key focus of the sub group is to assess any change in threat from organised crime in a post EU Exit context and prioritise a coordinated operational response to organised criminal activity that may be associated to changes in arrangements post EU Exit. The work on cross border smuggling, including smuggling of fuel, is now considered by this group rather than having a standalone fuel fraud sub group. This enables fuel fraud to be considered as part of developing a full strategic picture of the threat posed by criminals seeking to exploit the common travel area and routings in and out of Northern Ireland. The focus and priorities of this sub group are flexible and will adapt to respond to emerging threats or issues.

Extensive multi-agency and cross border cooperation is a key element in the operational response to organised crime. HMRC continues to work in partnership with other enforcement agencies including Revenue in Ireland. This effective collaboration was demonstrated recently in a joint Revenue and HMRC operation to disrupt a fuel laundering plant in December 2020 in Co Monaghan.

Cross-border co-operation is essential in the fight against organised criminality on this island. We have a strong track record of working in partnership with our colleagues in the South, including through the operational Joint Agency Task Force established as part of a concerted and enhanced effort to tackle organised and cross jurisdictional crime.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice to detail what facial recognition technologies are used by the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18603/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** There is currently no facial recognition technology being used within the Criminal Justice system in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) what data her Department holds in relation to dating fraud and romance scams in Northern Ireland; and (ii) what actions her Department is taking to raise the awareness of, and address dating fraud and romance scams in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18604/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** My Department does not hold any data in relation to dating fraud and romance scams in Northern Ireland. Action Fraud is the UK's national fraud and internet crime reporting centre and has been responsible for recording fraud (including romance scams) and internet crime, with effect from 01 April 2015. Action Fraud figures relating to fraud and cybercrime

occurring in Northern Ireland are provided to PSNI on a monthly basis. The PSNI monitor scams on an ongoing basis, however they do not hold any specific data on this type of scam.

Most dating and romance scams are carried out online. The increasing popularity of online dating websites has opened up opportunities for fraudsters to trick genuine users. They will use a range of methods to get access to cash. These include: setting up fake profiles; moving contact off the dating website as soon as possible to avoid detection; being very flattering and keen to build a relationship; and making excuses as to why it is not possible to meet face to face.

Addressing and raising awareness of all types of scams involves working at a multi-partner level. My Department works to tackle the issue of scams by supporting and contributing funding to initiatives of the Scamwise NI Partnership which was established in November 2016.

The Partnership is chaired by the PSNI and involves over 40 partners working collaboratively to raise awareness of scams. Partners include DoJ, PSNI, NI Policing Board, Trading Standards NI, the Consumer Council, the Cyber Security Centre, the Commissioner for Older People, Ofcom, representatives from the retail and banking sector including Royal Mail and the Post Office and a number of faith and youth groups.

As part of its awareness raising activities, the Scamwise Partnership NI has developed a series of books aimed at raising awareness of scams. The 'Little Book of Big Scams' contains a section on dating and romance fraud. It provides a comprehensive guide on how scams operate, how people can fall victim to fraudsters and, most importantly, how people can protect themselves and spot scams.

In addition, the Partnership has developed a series of video clips, including one on dating and romance scams. With part funding from my Department, this video outlines how not everyone is who they appear to be online and how victims can be targeted for financial gain rather than romance.

Working in partnership with Banks, Building Societies, and the Post Office they have taken steps to raise staff awareness of such scams and have trained them to encourage asking certain questions when customers are requesting access to large amounts of cash.

It is important to ensure that the Scamwise message reaches a wide audience through social media. My Department uses its own social media channels (including Twitter & Instagram) to highlight current scams and inform the public about what they should be wary of. These DoJ channels are also used to signpost the public to the NI Direct Scamwise NI page for up to date information and support as well as highlighting who to contact if they fear they have been targeted by a scam, including the PSNI and Action Fraud.

**Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 18168/17-22, to provide a copy of this policy.  
(AQW 18614/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** A copy of the Northern Ireland Prison Service, Body Worn Video Camera Policy has been deposited in the Assembly Library.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Justice how many requests her Department received for the translation of documents into (i) Irish; and (ii) Ulster Scots, in each of the last three years.  
(AQW 18631/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** The Department has not received any requests for the translation of documents into Irish or Ulster Scots in the last three financial years.

**Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many social workers were working in Woodlands Juvenile Centre Bangor between and during the months of January and March 2021; (ii) how many people were residing in the centre; and (iii) what measures were deployed to redeploy social workers to other departments.  
(AQW 18633/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** Woodlands, Juvenile Justice Centre is Northern Ireland's only custodial facility for young people under the age of 18 in Northern Ireland. Woodlands, provides a 24 hour/365 day service for young people who are admitted to custody through PACE, Remand or Sentence, through the Police Service of Northern Ireland or the Northern Ireland Court System.

- (i) Between January and March 2021 a total of 21 social workers worked in Woodlands across a rotating shift pattern and as part of a multi-disciplinary team.
- (ii) The number of young people that reside in the Centre fluctuates on a daily basis

	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21
Average	7	8	5
Maximum	10	11	8

- (iii) In order to provide the appropriate level of safe and secure care to vulnerable young people in Woodlands it is critical that the appropriate level of qualified and experienced staff are available to meet operational need. Given this, coupled

with the unpredictable and fluctuating nature of the population levels within Woodlands, the capacity to redeploy social work staff is limited.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic Woodlands have monitored staffing levels within the Centre to ensure adequate supervision and care can be provided to our young people.

**Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Justice what steps are taken to ensure that staff in Woodlands Juvenile Centre are notified when a colleague has a positive diagnosis of COVID-19.

**(AQW 18634/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre has liaised closely with the Public Health Agency Northern Ireland over the course of the pandemic and supported its role in contact tracing and identifying potential close contacts of those who test positive for Covid-19.

The Woodlands Contact Tracing Procedure, which was drawn up in collaboration with the PHA, describes the purpose and process of identifying close contacts within the workplace of staff who test positive for Covid-19. It establishes the criteria for identifying someone as a close contact and sets out the actions that result from identifying someone as a close contact of a staff member testing positive.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of convictions secured for (i) being armed with an offensive weapon with intent to commit an offence; (ii) possessing an article with a blade or point in a public place; (iii) possessing an article with a blade or point on school premises, in each of the last three years; and (iv) whether she has any plans to further legislate on knife crime or the sale of knives.

**(AQW 18660/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Information in relation to this question was provided in the answer to AQW 16024 17-22 on 25 March 2021. No further update on the numbers of convictions provided in that answer is available. Neither has there been any change to the situation in relation to plans to further legislate on knife crime or the sale of knives in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice (i) why neither the PSNI or Prison Service notify victims of crimes that the perpetrators of those crimes are due to be released from prison; and (ii) how she will ensure that victims of crimes are informed that the perpetrators are due for release from prison.

**(AQW 18730/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The Prisoner Release Victim Information Scheme already provides for registered victims to be given a range of information about offenders including information about their release from prison.

**Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Justice (i) how long records are held by the Coroners Service; and (ii) what happens to records no longer being held by the Service.

**(AQW 18780/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** As with all departmental records, the disposition of the records of the Coroner's Service NI is governed by the department's Retention & Disposal Schedules, which are drawn up in consultation with the Public Record Office of NI, and in line with the requirements of the Public Records Act 1923 and the Disposal of Documents Order 1925.

To acquire legal force, the legislation requires that these Schedules are laid in the library of the NI Assembly for 10 sitting days; the current schedules (Version 4.0) went through this process and came into force in May 2016. The full Schedule may be found at: <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doj/retention-and-disposal-schedule-final-signed-copy.pdf>.

The following extract from the schedules lays out how the Coroner's records must be disposed of:

Coroners				
13.16	Day Books, Inquest files – which do proceed, including Post Mortem reports	Transfer to PRONI – 20 Years after closure – historical record	Coroners Act (NI) 1959, 1984 Coroners Rules; Police and Criminal Evidence (NI) Order 1989 (PACE)	Permanent Preservation
13.17	Inquests – which do not proceed; Pro Forma letters, forms & death certificates	15 years after closure	Coroners Act (NI) 1959, 1984 Coroners Rules	Destroy

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) what specific training is provided to PSNI officers in relation to dealing with members of the public on the Autism Spectrum or have learning disabilities; and (ii) the number of officers who have undertaken such training, in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 18896/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Decisions relating to the training of police officers are ultimately 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. Therefore, you may wish to raise your issues directly with the Chief Constable.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Justice (i) what is the name of the events company with which the PSNI co-operated in respect of the Storey funeral; (ii) is it licensed: and (iii) for what purposes.

**(AQW 19059/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** These are operational matters for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting this operational independence.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Justice, in light of recent media revelations contradicting that a licensed events company was involved in the funeral of Bobby Storey, whether she will reassess the findings of the HMICFRS report.

**(AQW 19132/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The inspection I commissioned from HMICFRS, at the request of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, was of the PSNI's handling of the events surrounding the Bobby Storey funeral. The actions of those involved in the funeral were neither part of the scope of this inspection nor within the remit of HMICFRS to inspect.

## Department for the Economy

**Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail any schemes available to people wanting to introduce solar energy to their homes.

**(AQW 15497/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** No schemes are currently available to support domestic solar energy.

My Department is leading on the development of a new Energy Strategy, however, which will set the policy direction for NI's contribution to achieving the UK's commitment to achieve net zero emissions by 2050.

Officials are liaising with key stakeholders to consider options on the support measures needed to encourage increased levels of renewables from a wide range of technologies, including solar.

I published an options consultation on the Energy Strategy on 31 March 2021.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy what progress her Department has made in developing a regionally balanced economy, as agreed in New Decade, New Approach.

**(AQW 16489/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** While the focus since the Covid-19 pandemic emerged has rightly been on supporting our businesses and economy through immediate interventions and planning for economic recovery, it is also important to prepare for the future of the economy.

On 25th February my Department published an Economic Recovery Action Plan which set out a range of decisive actions to kick-start economic recovery as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In many cases, these actions are intertwined and cross-cutting, delivering against multiple priorities identified within the 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy' framework such as:

- Delivering better jobs;
- Addressing regional imbalance;
- People and Wellbeing; and
- Resilience.

The actions will deliver opportunities for our people and drive economic recovery that is inclusive and regionally balanced.

My Department has supported the City and Growth Deals through identifying projects for inclusion and plans to invest heavily in place based innovation as part of continuing support for this programme.

The Department's £165million Project Stratum broadband improvement scheme will radically transform rural broadband connectivity once completed, helping to ensure that people in rural areas are not held back by lack of access to online services.

The Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and the Climate Crisis present unprecedented challenges for our economy. These challenges, in combination with the persistent structural weaknesses of our economy, mean that we must strive to reshape the economy in a way we have not done before.

I launched a bold and ambitious new vision for the Northern Ireland economy through a decade of innovation on 11 May. The vision places innovation at the centre of addressing the uneven impacts of the pandemic and the wider societal and environmental challenges of our time. It is important that economic growth, within this decade of innovation, is inclusive and means something for all our people and places.

We are seeking to achieve success, in part, through having a renewed focus on place-based economic investments and investing in local projects, to boost support to localities across NI which are tailored to their unique proposition. Although the Department does not create jobs in specific locations to address regional economic imbalances, the vision will seek to promote economic growth across Northern Ireland by building on our strengths, such as our innovation ecosystem, and responding to opportunities such as increased remote working.

The vision sets out a high level ambition which will be supported by a work programme to outline priorities and actions that will enable our economy to meet the challenges presented to us and to take advantage of economic opportunities.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy when (i) AQW 15383/17-22; and (ii) AQW 15610/17-22 will be answered. **(AQW 16781/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** A response to AQW 15383/17-22 was issued on 14 April 2021 and a response to AQW 15610/17-22 was issued on 31 March 2021.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her role in resolving the current pay dispute with further education lecturers. **(AQW 18387/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** I want to take this opportunity to set out clearly what my role and that of my Department is in relation to the current dispute as there appears to be some misunderstanding at present, and my role may differ from other Ministers in other Departments.

The Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 which established the Further Education Colleges specifies that:

“The terms and conditions of the employees of the governing body of an institution of further education ..... shall be such as may be determined by the governing body after consultation with representatives of the employees concerned.”

The Governing Bodies of the colleges are therefore employers in their own right and negotiations on lecturer's terms and conditions take place through the Lecturers Negotiating Committee which is comprised of representatives of Colleges as the employers and the Trade Unions. As I have said previously, neither the Department nor I as Minister have any role in these negotiations and I understand that this position has been adopted consistently by previous ministers, both in the Department for Economy and previously the Department for Employment and Learning, during earlier negotiations.

The Department's role and my role as Minister reflect our respective responsibilities in ensuring that proper governance is in place around the use of public resources. Colleges are Non-Departmental Public Bodies of the Department and are required under their respective Financial Memoranda to refer “any activities which appear novel, contentious or repercussive” to DfE as their sponsor Department for approval. In addition, colleges are required to ensure that annual pay increases for staff must be in accordance with the Department of Finance guidance. All proposed pay awards must have prior approval of both the Department and the Department of Finance before implementation.

As a result, any Business Case developed as a result of the negotiations will have to be referred to the Department for appraisal prior to seeking my approval before approval is sought from the Department of Finance.

The Departmental appraisal of the Business Case will consider the issue of affordability and will identify the extent of any additional financial resources which would be required to deliver the preferred option. I will then explore at that point, how any additional requirements can be met including whether a bid for additional resources is required. However, you will note that I cannot submit a formal bid for additional resources until there is an approved business case in place and I have clarity on the quantum of resource required.

I considered that it was important to provide this level of detail as comparisons have been made between my role and the role which the Minister for Education played in the recent negotiations on teachers' pay. Teachers' terms and conditions are negotiated within the Teachers' Negotiating Committee (TNC) which is made up of DE, employing authorities and the five recognised teachers' unions (known collectively as NITC). DE determines pay and uses TNC to negotiate it:

“in accordance with the provisions of Article 69(1) and (6) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, following negotiations with Teachers' Unions, the Department of Education has determined that the salaries and allowances to be paid to teachers in grant-aided schools shall be...”

In addition, in relation to my role, the fact that I and my officials meet with the Colleges regularly but have not met with the Trade Unions is being cited as evidence that neither the Department nor I can carry out an impartial and objective assessment of any business case developed as a result of the negotiations.

As I explained earlier, DfE is sponsor Department for the six FE Colleges and I as Minister, am ultimately accountable to the Assembly for their efficiency and effectiveness. This necessitates regular meetings between colleges and their sponsor Department to obtain assurance on how public funding is being utilised. That is a key part of my role and of DfE's role as a sponsor Department. I do not have a similar function in relation to trade unions.

I have gone into some detail in this response in order to clear up some of the misconceptions which have been circulating recently and I hope this provides some clarity around the role that I and my Department are required to play during the current negotiations. I would stress that in no way should our requirement to carry out that role be seen as an impediment or a barrier to the negotiations which are currently ongoing.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for the Economy what action she is taking to assist the traders' associations on Belfast's arterial routes to aid local business recovery.

**(AQW 18505/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Economic Recovery Action Plan sets out the actions that will enable us to build a more competitive and inclusive economy as we move forward from today. That is why on 30th April I was delighted to announce my intention to implement the High Street Stimulus Scheme, which is a cornerstone of my Economic Recovery Action Plan aimed at boosting demand in our struggling towns, city centres and providing much needed support to our local businesses.

As part of the recovery agenda I have assisted our retail sector through the provision of the Covid-19 Digital Selling Capability Grant which assisted small or medium-sized retailers prepare for growth, develop their customer base and find new markets by enhancing their digital offering, building e-commerce capability and increasing online sales. This was extended to micro-businesses with the introduction of the Covid-19 Micro-business E-commerce Grant.

My Department is also represented on the Executive Office's High Street Task Force. The strategic aim of this is to contribute to the development of thriving and sustainable city, town and village centres.

The purpose of the Taskforce is to contribute to:

- developing the strategic approach to delivering the vision and responding to the economic and social challenges facing village, town and city centres;
- building and strengthening the partnerships that will deliver the strategic response; and
- building the capacity needed to achieve the vision.

The Taskforce will also look at a longer-term vision based upon our town and city centres being diverse business ecosystems that meet the needs of communities. Making town and city centres more attractive to visitors will benefit all businesses within that eco-system.

On May 11th, I launched a bold and ambitious new vision for the Northern Ireland economy. The vision sets out our long term ambition for the economy including delivering economic prosperity across all of Northern Ireland, for all our people.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm what actions she is taking to provide increased university and further education places for students leaving post primary schools in 2021, to ensure young people, whose education has been disrupted by COVID-19, have the opportunity to progress in education.

**(AQW 18607/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Higher Education

As noted in my Economic Recovery Action Plan, increases to higher education undergraduate places were introduced in 2020-21 and these places will be funded for two further academic years.

FE Capital Projects

My Department is continuing its investment in the Further Education (FE) estate to deliver modern, efficient, fit for purpose campuses that are welcoming, comfortable, healthy, neutral and vibrant places to learn and innovate.

In 2020, two major capital projects to build new campuses were completed in Banbridge and Armagh with a further new campus, in Enniskillen, being completed last month. These three buildings represent an investment of approximately £80million and, although they do not increase the capacity of the estate, it is hoped that sector wide marketing and promotional campaigns undertaken over the coming months will encourage an increased number of students leaving post primary schools in 2021 to avail of the state of the art, accessible facilities provided.

In addition these new campuses will offer significantly improved student facilities and support infrastructure, providing a greatly enhanced curriculum offering utilising the latest technology and equipment.

Learner Numbers

Over recent years FE colleges have faced a number of factors including a "demographic dip" in 16-19 year olds, improving school exam performance and most recently the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic, which have combined to reduce learner numbers in colleges by 14.5% from 82,818 in 2015/16 to 70,847.

The resulting availability of capacity within new state of the art accommodation equipped to industry standards means that colleges are particularly well placed to accommodate any students who have found their education disrupted by the recent pandemic and to provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to progress to employment or higher education.

#### Marketing the FE Sector

In order to raise public awareness of these opportunities available through Further Education, DfE has now commissioned the six colleges to work together to create a collective identity for the sector and to develop an annual campaign which will focus specifically on promoting the unique product offering for full time FE and HE provision.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has met with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster Ulster to review entry level qualifications to take account of the disruption due to COVID-19.

**(AQW 18609/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** No, I have not met with the Higher Education Institutions to review their entry level requirements.

As autonomous bodies, universities are responsible for their own policies and procedures on admissions.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will extend the £500 COVID-19 Disruption Payment to further education students.

**(AQW 18617/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** While I have given due consideration to extending the Covid Disruption Payment Scheme to include further education students, I am content that the decision not to include these students remains appropriate.

The rationale for excluding FE students was that, on the whole, FE students are less likely to be paying accommodation costs/ tuition fees and other expenses that HE students face. Moreover, my Department has provided £29.5m financial support in 2020/21 to FE students and colleges.

Students on FE courses at local colleges are already being supported through a range of mechanisms. To date, I have secured additional funding of £7.7m, of which £4.8m is being used to provide additional IT equipment to allow continued access from home for both college staff and students and to help address digital poverty, including providing almost 1,200 SIM cards, and the remaining £2.9m for an additional 500 devices, and a one-off payment of £60 to eligible full-time and part-time FE students to help with data costs.

The Department provides a range of interventions annually to support FE students throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, including adaptations to existing financial support programmes to encourage continued participation in FE courses. This included FE Grants; FE Hardship Fund; Care to Learn childcare scheme; Home to College Transport; Free School Meals/ Clothing Allowance; and Additional Support Fund for those with a disability. The combined value of these existing support arrangements totals £13m per annum.

Furthermore, the Department has worked with the colleges to increase the flexibility of these policies in relation to student support, to make them more accessible. This has included paying childcare retainer fees during the initial lockdown; FE Grants and Hardship Fund have been updated to facilitate claimants participating in distance learning with an extension to the closing date for FE grant applications in both the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years; Free School Meals and holiday payments for all eligible school age FE students have been made directly into households, continuing into term 3 of the academic year. Specifically within the Hardship Fund, increases have been made to the Dependant Student rate, which provides eligible FE students with an additional £15 per week; and making part-time and repeat students eligible to apply to all elements of Hardship Fund. It has also been agreed to extend these flexibilities into term 3 of the academic year.

A comprehensive review of the collective package of FE Student Support is currently underway, and my Department will continue to keep FE student support arrangements under review in response to evolving needs.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the international progress on the use of green hydrogen for property heating; and (ii) whether her Department is aware of any major housing schemes that have successfully used green hydrogen for property heating.

**(AQW 18647/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Although heating is just one of a number of potential applications for hydrogen, I am aware that other countries are trialling the use of a hydrogen blend in their natural gas networks to explore this as a decarbonisation option, such as:

- Green HySLAND – Mallorca (2020)
- EU Wide HIGGS project (2020)

In the UK, Phase one of HyDeploy, which is a pioneering hydrogen energy project designed to help reduce UK CO2 emissions and reach the Government's net zero target for 2050, has been trialling a twenty per cent hydrogen blend into a closed gas network at Keele University.

After Phase one is completed, HyDeploy will move to a larger demonstration on a public network in the North East. After that, HyDeploy will have another large demonstration in the North West.

**Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will consider any form of intervention to ensure that the iconic and economically important Barry's leisure and funfair site in Portrush continues as a going concern.

**(AQW 18662/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** I was saddened to hear of the proposed closure of Barry's Leisure & Entertainment Complex in Portrush after several generations of providing family fun and entertainment on the north coast. The Trufelli family have operated the complex since 1926 and it has become an iconic site synonymous with Portrush ever since.

The Complex is a private and commercially run establishment and it is my understanding that it has been a personal and business decision of the Trufelli family to cease their business operation and put it up for sale. The media has reported that the Trufelli family had sought to sell the Portrush site since October 2019, with the process disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Neither Tourism NI or Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council have had any direct contact with the owners of Barry's on this matter, partly due to the fact that it is a private business that is making a personal and/or commercial decision to sell.

I understand that Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council are currently engaged in a bid process for the sale of the Dunluce Centre Leisure and Tourism Facility in Portrush for the purposes of tourism and recreation.

Causeway Coast & Glens area attracts the second highest level of tourism spend throughout N. Ireland at £190m (2019) and Tourism NI has invested heavily in the Giants Causeway Visitor Centre, Causeway Coastal Route, The Open Golf tournament in 2019 among other interventions over the past 10 years or more.

Tourism NI also works very closely with Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council supporting stakeholders and tourism operators in the area who offer visitor experiences in the immediate and wider area including surfing, boat trips, tours, food and drink experiences, world class golf courses and heritage attractions.

Tourism NI will continue to work closely with Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council and other key stakeholders in the area to ensure that Portrush continues to provide a high quality and sustainable tourism and leisure offering on the North Coast.

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for the Economy given the potential impact on the local tourism industry after 1 October 2021, whether she has any plans to work with her counterparts in the British Government to restore the Collective Passport List for Travellers of visiting school groups from the EU.

**(AQW 18795/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Immigration matters are excepted under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and remain the responsibility of the UK Government.

The UK Government has decided to end the List of Travellers scheme (which allows a non-EEA pupil legally resident in an EU Member State to visit or transit to another EU Member State without a passport and/or visa-free as part of an organised school group) on 1 October 2021 along with the change to travel on EEA and Swiss identity cards. It means all pupils based in the EEA and Switzerland, no matter their nationality, will, unless they have protected rights under the Citizens' Rights Agreements, need a passport - and visa if required - to visit the UK on an organised school trip with effect from the same date.

My Department will continue to engage with the UK Government to ensure the immigration system meets the needs of the Northern Ireland Economy.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of (i) the connections between her Department and the gas industry; and (ii) the influence of the gas industry on her Department's policy making.

**(AQW 18866/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department's principle objective under Article 14 of the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 is to promote the development and maintenance of an efficient, economic and co-ordinated gas industry in Northern Ireland. In line with this objective, the Department has ongoing engagement with the Utility Regulator and gas industry representatives across a range of legislative, market, and regulatory issues, including a more recent focus on potential options for taking forward decarbonisation of gas networks.

As part of work to develop the new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland, due to be finalised later this year, the Department has sought the views of a range of stakeholders, including the gas industry. The gas sector is represented on the Energy Strategy's Heat Working Group, along with the electricity sector and other stakeholders. This Group is currently looking at a range of potential options for decarbonising heat as part of the pathway to net zero. My Department has also recently written to the natural gas sector asking for their proposals for a credible, robust, and evidence based pathway to Net Zero by 2050.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy how her Department intends to promote digital innovation and business transformation in order to assist with the operation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland and the facilitation of trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18867/17-22)**



**Mrs Dodds:** I am fully committed to a digitally innovative economy. My Department's economic vision '10X Economy – an economic vision for a decade of innovation', which was recently published, seeks to enhance innovation to deliver a 10 times better economy with benefits for all. It embraces our innovative culture and sets a pathway to see more of our businesses, especially our small businesses and emerging entrepreneurs, putting new ideas into practice to build a competitive advantage in this decade of innovation.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to make representations to Hovis following workers industrial action over pay.

**(AQW 18883/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** As you will appreciate, it would be inappropriate for me as Minister for the Economy to comment on an ongoing dispute relating to a specific employer.

Nonetheless, I would encourage both sides, if they have not already done so, to consider engaging with the Labour Relations Agency Collective Conciliation service in the hope of reaching an early and fair settlement to this dispute.

The Agency's Collective Conciliation service can help employers, employees and Trade Unions to try to reach acceptable settlements in relation to a collective dispute.

The Agency's Conciliator is there to bring a neutral, independent perspective, and to encourage parties to consider if there are options that will enable them to break the deadlock.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline any further or new assistance in place to help self-employed musicians financially.

**(AQW 18949/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Department for Communities (DfC) has lead responsibility for supporting the arts sector in Northern Ireland, and through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, has provided funding to support artists and performers with grants of up to £5,000 during the COVID-19 crisis.

DfC has recently established a Culture, Arts & Heritage Recovery Taskforce to consider measures to support reopening and recovery of these sectors in the short-term, paving the way for a longer term strategy for future years.

I would suggest therefore that this question would be more appropriate for that Department.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister for the Economy further to the response to AQW 16803/17-22, can the 35 EU laws falling directly within the devolved ambit be precisely identified.

**(AQW 18972/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** It is currently considered that the following 35 high-level EU instruments which apply to Northern Ireland by virtue of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, concern policy areas which are wholly or partly devolved and engage, to varying degrees, the responsibilities of the Department for the Economy. This is the most up-to-date working assessment but is potentially subject to change.

- Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32006L0054&qid=1611593259887>)
- Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32000L0078>)
- Council Regulation (EC) No 515/97 of 13 March 1997 on mutual assistance between the administrative authorities of the Member States and cooperation between the latter and the Commission to ensure the correct application of the law on customs and agricultural matters (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:31997R0515>)
- Directive (EU) 2015/1535 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 September 2015 laying down a procedure for the provision of information in the field of technical regulations and of rules on Information Society services, with the exception of provisions relating to rules on information society services (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32015L1535>)
- Regulation (EU) No 1025/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 on European standardisation, amending Council Directives 89/686/EEC and 93/15/EEC and Directives 94/9/EC, 94/25/EC, 95/16/EC, 97/23/EC, 98/34/EC, 2004/22/EC, 2007/23/EC, 2009/23/EC and 2009/105/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Council Decision 87/95/EEC and Decision No 1673/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1584435576817&uri=CELEX:32012R1025>)
- Council Directive 85/374/EEC of 25 July 1985 on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States concerning liability for defective products (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/GA/ALL/?uri=CELEX:31985L0374>)
- Council Directive 73/361/EEC of 19 November 1973 on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States relating to the certification and marking of wire-ropes, chains and hooks (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A31973L0361>)

- Council Directive 92/42/EEC of 21 May 1992 on efficiency requirements for new hot-water boilers fired with liquid or gaseous fuels (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/GA/TXT/?uri=CELEX:31992L0042>)
- Regulation (EU) 2016/426 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 on appliances burning gaseous fuels and repealing Directive 2009/142/EC (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/426/oj>)
- Directive 2010/35/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 June 2010 on transportable pressure equipment and repealing Council Directives 76/767/EEC, 84/525/EEC, 84/526/EEC, 84/527/EEC and 1999/36/EC (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32010L0035>)
- Directive 2014/68/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making available on the market of pressure equipment (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32014L0068>)
- Directive 2014/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making available on the market of simple pressure vessels ([https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L\\_.2014.096.01.0045.01.ENG](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2014.096.01.0045.01.ENG))
- Council Directive 76/211/EEC of 20 January 1976 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making-up by weight or by volume of certain prepackaged products (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A31976L0211>)
- Council Directive 80/181/EEC of 20 December 1979 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to units of measurement and on the repeal of Directive 71/354/EEC7 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A31980L0181>)
- Directive 2007/45/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 September 2007 laying down rules on nominal quantities for prepacked products, repealing Council Directives 75/106/EEC and 80/232/EEC, and amending Council Directive 76/211/EEC (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32007L0045>)
- Directive 2011/17/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2011 repealing Council Directives 71/317/EEC, 71/347/EEC, 71/349/EEC, 74/148/EEC, 75/33/EEC, 76/765/EEC, 76/766/EEC and 86/217/EEC regarding metrology (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011L0017>)
- Directive 2014/31/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to the making available on the market of non-automatic weighing instruments (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32014L0031>)
- Regulation (EU) 2016/425 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 on personal protective equipment and repealing Council Directive 89/686/EEC (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32016R0425>)
- Directive 2006/42/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 May 2006 on machinery, and amending Directive 95/16/EC (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32006L0042>)
- Directive 2014/34/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the harmonisation of the laws of the Member States relating to equipment and protective systems intended for use in potentially explosive atmospheres (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32014L0034>)
- Regulation (EU) No 649/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 July 2012 concerning the export and import of hazardous chemicals (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32012R0649>)
- Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 concerning the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH), establishing a European Chemicals Agency, amending Directive 1999/45/EC and repealing Council Regulation (EEC) No 793/93 and Commission Regulation (EC) No 1488/94 as well as Council Directive 76/769/EEC and Commission Directives 91/155/EEC, 93/67/EEC, 93/105/EC and 2000/21/EC1 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32006R1907>)
- Regulation (EC) No 1272/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on classification, labelling and packaging of substances and mixtures, amending and repealing Directives 67/548/EEC and 1999/45/EC, and amending Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32008R1272>)
- Regulation (EU) No 528/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 May 2012 concerning the making available on the market and use of biocidal products (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32012R0528>)
- Regulation (EC) No 106/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 January 2008 on a Community energy-efficiency labelling programme for office equipment (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32008R0106>)
- Directive 2009/125/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 October 2009 establishing a framework for the setting of ecodesign requirements for energy-related products (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32009L0125>)
- Regulation (EU) 2017/1369 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 July 2017 setting a framework for energy labelling and repealing Directive 2010/30/EU (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2017/1369/oj>)
- Council Regulation (EC) No 2964/95 of 20 December 1995 introducing registration for crude oil imports and deliveries in the Community (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A31995R2964>)

- Directive 2014/40/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 April 2014 on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States concerning the manufacture, presentation and sale of tobacco and related products and repealing Directive 2001/37/EC (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32014L0040&qid=1610056453805>)
- Directive 2009/72/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 concerning common rules for the internal market in electricity and repealing Directive 2003/54/EC (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32009L0072>)
- Regulation (EC) No 714/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 on conditions for access to the network for cross-border exchanges in electricity and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1228/2003 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32009R0714>)
- Regulation (EC) No 713/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 establishing an Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32009R0713>)
- Directive 2005/89/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 January 2006 concerning measures to safeguard security of electricity supply and infrastructure investment (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32005L0089>)
- Regulation (EU) No 1227/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on wholesale energy market integrity and transparency (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011R1227>)
- Directive 2010/75/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 November 2010 on industrial emissions (integrated pollution prevention and control) (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32010L0075>)



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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 28 May 2021

## Written Answers to Questions

### The Executive Office

**Mr Carroll** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether sports massage therapists and gyms can open on 6 July 2020; and by what guidance they must abide.

**(AQW 5116/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister):** The relaxations to the Coronavirus regulations announced by the Executive provided for the reopening of close contact businesses, including massage, from 6 July 2020 and for indoor gyms from 10 July. These relaxations applied on the basis that there is adherence to all relevant public health guidance and mitigating measures.

The NI Engagement Forum has produced "Covid-19: Working Through It Together: A Practical Guide to Making Workplaces Safer" guidance which businesses can access online at NI Business Info. Workplace guidance has been produced for Close Contact Services and, advice and guidance is also available from trade and business bodies. Local protocols for the reopening of gyms have been developed in conjunction with councils, sports and groups representing the leisure industry including UK Active.

**Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the £21.6 million identified to the Department of Finance as a pressure in relation to the victims' pension is the figure anticipated as necessary to pay these pensions in 2021/22.

**(AQW 13128/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The figure of £28 million which has been quoted for Year 1 of the Scheme was an early estimate based on potential throughput of applications. In light of the information received from the Government Actuary's Department, cost estimates for Year 1 for payments are £19 million with further administrative costs of £6.7 million.

The Executive has approved £6.7 million in 2021/22 for administrative costs of the Scheme, demonstrating the Executive's commitment to the delivery of the Scheme.

The Executive Office has also 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.

We will continue to progress financial discussions with the Secretary of State and NIO in the context of their funding responsibilities for the scheme.

**Mr McNulty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they plan to allow florists to open for Mother's Day on 14 March, even to permit deliveries or click and collect services.

**(AQW 15027/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** All non-essential retail re-opened on 30 April 2021, this includes florists.

Shops must take all reasonable measures to manage risk, including ensuring measures are in place to maintain physical distancing.

Face coverings (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-face-coverings>) must be worn when attending any retail premises, including any indoor area of a shopping centre, unless exempt.

Information on how to stay safe when shopping is available here:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-staying-safe-while-shopping>

**Miss Woods** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, further to announcements made on 18 February on COVID-19 restrictions, whether outdoor markets can sell non-essential, non-food items.

**(AQW 15270/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** From 30 April, all non-essential retail, including outdoor markets, is permitted to open.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 can be found at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/health-protection-coronavirus-restrictions-regulations-northern-ireland-2021>

NI Direct guidance can be found here:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you#toc-13>

**Miss Woods** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for an update on funding allocations for the payments to be made under the Victims' Payment Scheme; and (ii) to detail the estimated costs in year one.

**(AQW 15361/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:**

(i) Update on funding allocations

The Executive has approved £6.7 million in 2021/22 for administrative costs of the Scheme, demonstrating the Executive's commitment to the delivery of the Scheme.

The Executive Office has also 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.

We will continue to progress financial discussions with the Secretary of State and NIO in the context of their funding responsibilities for the scheme.

(ii) Estimated costs in year one.

Officials carried out extensive scoping work to determine potential numbers of successful applications to the Scheme and engaged Government Actuary's Department to provide detailed modelling based on those estimates. This has been a challenging task because there is no definitive information on numbers who may qualify, nor of the degree or permanence of disability.

The approximate costs for payments up to the financial year end 2021/22 have been calculated as £19m.

**Mr McNulty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister where bookmakers fit into Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions.

**(AQW 15887/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Executive published Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions on Tuesday 2 March 2021 and it is available here- Coronavirus (COVID-19) regulations: Pathway out of restrictions | nidirect (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-pathway-out-restrictions>).

A review of the restrictions took place on 15 April and a number of relaxations were announced.

This included allowing all non-essential retail including bookmakers to re-open from 30 April 2021.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what engagement they have had with the British Government to ensure the vaccination programme in Northern Ireland continues until such times as the island of Ireland is considered COVID-19 resistant.

**(AQW 16212/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The vaccination programme is progressing well in line with the prioritisation as recommended by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

The roll out of the programme remains critically dependent on vaccine production, supply and distribution. The Department of Health has the lead responsibility for the Vaccination Programme. Details on vaccination roll out can be found here <https://covid-19.hscni.net/>

We and the Minister of Health and the Chief Medical Officer remain in regular and close contact with our counterparts across the Common Travel Area to ensure a coordinated approach to Covid Recovery.

**Mr McNulty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline where (i) motor sports; (ii) car washes; (iii) Irish dancing; (iv) one-to-one music tuition; and (v) one-to-one martial arts fit into their Pathway to Recovery plans.

**(AQW 16512/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Moving Forward: The Executives Pathway out of Restrictions sets out the Executive's agreed approach for moving out of the current Coronavirus restrictions.

Motor Sports, Martial Arts and Irish Dancing will be covered under the Sports and Leisure Pathway, car washes under the Retail and Services Pathway and one-to-one music tuition under the Education and Young People Pathway.

The Pathway outlines five phases of how we plan to reduce and remove the restrictions that are currently in place.

We will use a broad range of data, information and statistical indicators to inform decisions on the relaxation of restrictions when the time is right, or indeed whether we need to return to strengthening them. These decisions will be driven by data, not dates.

**Mr Carroll** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how many organisations are expected to access funding via the Communities in Transition programme.

**(AQW 17278/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** During the first delivery phase of the Communities in Transition Project, which has run from November 2019 to date, 34 individual interventions have been delivered covering a variety of themes such as Health and Wellbeing, Community Safety and Community Development.

For these interventions, a total of 272 individual organisations are involved in the Project. Of these, 19 different organisations have been awarded contracts as lead delivery partners with 56 further organisations participating as formal tender partners. Other groups involved in the Project include community groups, churches, schools, youth clubs, sports clubs, local businesses, etc.

At an individual level, over 1,300 people have participated in the Project to date.

In terms of how many organisations are 'expected' to access funding through the upcoming second phase of the Communities in Transition Project, it would not be possible to say at this point as all phase two projects will be subject to an open tender process (which is due to commence in May 2021). This process may result in single lead organisations being appointed, or alternatively partnerships and consortia may come forward to lead delivery on individual projects. It is anticipated that a similar number of projects will be supported in the second phase of the Project as has been during this initial phase.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures they have taken to introduce COVID-19 mandatory hotel quarantine arrangements for passengers arriving at ports and airports.

**(AQW 17329/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** To stop the spread of potentially harmful variants, more stringent measures are in place for people who have travelled from or passed through a country on the list where travel is banned (the red list) in the last 10 days before arrival.

Since 19 April everyone who arrives here from a red list country must book and enter managed isolation for 10 full days from the point of their arrival, unless they are exempt. Further details can be found on NI Direct - <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-managed-isolation-and-testing-after-travel-red-list-country>

**Mr Dickson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether self-contained touring caravans and motorhomes are included in the recent COVID-19 restriction easing plans for self-contained accommodation.

**(AQW 17470/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** A review of the current restrictions took place on 15 April and 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 includes any accommodation which does not require guests to share washing facilities, toilets or kitchens.

Guests can only share holiday accommodation with the people they live with in their household, and people in their bubble.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on NI Direct at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

**Mr Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on economic and job development at the 700 acres of the former Shackleton Barracks.

**(AQW 17728/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** MJM Group, the new Shackleton Site owner, agreed to regenerate Shackleton and provide 100 jobs on the 621 acre site. Pre-pandemic 23 jobs had been delivered on site.

Due to the impact of Covid 19, MJM has consolidated its workforce to its headquarters but has confirmed that it will rebuild its workforce on Shackleton in line with the easing of restrictions and economic recovery.

MJM Group confirmed recently that planning permission to build a Data Centre on site has been granted. When delivered the Data Centre will provide significant jobs on Shackleton. We are aware that the company is currently developing several other planning applications and is happy to discuss their plans for the site with you directly.

**Miss Woods** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide the rationale for allowing poetry readings, on the hour every hour, as opposed to a musician behind a Perspex screen and socially distanced, as a way of entertainment to comply with The Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1996.

**(AQW 18265/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Under the current regulations live music is not permitted for licensed or unlicensed premises.

Alternative lower risk forms of entertainment are permitted in line with the licensing law.

These measures allow premises to reopen safely and reduce the risk of transmission.

Further guidance for restaurants, pubs and bars is available at: <https://www.tourismni.com/covid-19/practical-guidance-for-working-safely-during-covid-19/guidance-for-restaurants-pubs-and-bars/>

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what instructions have been issued to local councils' environmental health officers on the implementation and interpretation of the Health Protection regulations relating to outdoor spaces for use by restaurants, bars and cafes; (ii) when these instructions were issued; (iii) why the regulations are being implemented or applied differently this year than in 2020; and (iv) whether those running restaurants, bars and cafes were notified of the different application of the rules prior to the week in which they reopened.

**(AQW 18270/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The Executive published a statement on 29 April confirming the position in relation to the regulations in advance of the re-opening of outdoor hospitality. It is available on the Executive Office website at: <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/news/executive-statement-outdoor-hospitality>

Coronavirus guidance for the hospitality sector is published by Tourism NI.

Specific guidance on the reopening of outdoor hospitality is available at <https://www.tourismni.com/globalassets/covid19/downloads/guidance/outdoor-hospitality/summary-of-restrictions-outdoor-hospitality.pdf>

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister given it is 19 years since the British government agreed to transfer the Ebrington site to the Executive, why a large proportion of the Ebrington site remains empty and unlet.

**(AQW 18453/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** Significant progress has been made on Ebrington since The Executive Office took responsibility for the regeneration of the Site in April 2016.

It is not the case that a large proportion of the site remains unlet. All land and buildings have been let or pre-let with all site buildings having a Lease, Agreement for Lease in place, or a preferred bidder identified.

**Miss Woods** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what engagement they have had with the UK Government in relation to the Canada-UK Trade Continuity Agreement and its impact on Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18931/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** As international trade falls within my Portfolio, I have led the engagement with the UK Government on the Canada-UK Trade Continuity Agreement.

**This agreement is largely a technical replication of the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), consequently engagement was principally by way of updates from the Department of International Trade on the progress of continuity negotiations.**

The UK-Canada Trade Continuity Agreement contains a review clause which will see a more comprehensive negotiation take place in the future. You may be aware that only last week the Department of International Trade launched a call for evidence into this future agreement. More information on how you can contribute to this call for evidence is at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/trade-with-canada-and-mexico-call-for-input>. My Department will also be engaging with local stakeholders to inform offensive and defensive priorities for Northern Ireland in a future deal.

**Ms Sugden** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any correspondence they have had with the UK government regarding extending the deadline for the EU Settlement Scheme, in particular for older people and those in care homes.

**(AQW 19043/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** While Immigration including the EUSS are not devolved matters we acknowledge the valuable contribution EU Nationals living here make to our society, culture and economy.

Officials continue to liaise with the Home Office on the impacts of EUSS and in regular discussions have encouraged consideration of an extension to the EUSS deadline. They have also sought flexibilities and protections for those having 'reasonable grounds' to make a late application. While the Home Office has advised that extension of the deadline is not being considered, guidance on 'reasonable grounds' to make a late application has been provided which includes where



someone is isolated, vulnerable or who did not have the digital skills to access the application process. This aligns with the barriers older EU Nationals may face.

To encourage uptake, the Executive Office has supplemented the UK wide public information campaign with a local campaign and since March 2021 has expanded this to cover TV, out-of-home and press advertising to help target individuals such as the elderly who are harder to reach.

**Mr Nesbitt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries and Historical Clerical Child Abuse.

**(AQO 1089/17-22)**

**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 both in relation to Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries as well as historical clerical child abuse.

**Mr Middleton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the High Streets Task Force.

**(AQO 1967/17-22)**

**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.

**Ms Mullan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of the recommendation in the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry Report in relation to a public apology.

**(AQO 2041/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** We are pleased to report that significant progress has been made on this key recommendation.

We met the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse, Fiona Ryan, on 24 March. Part of our conversation focused on how best to deliver the right apology in a way that addresses the issues of most concern to victims and survivors.

Officials, in consultation with the Commissioner, are working on proposals for the content and timing of the apology.

Victims and survivors deserve a full apology, and we will confirm dates and agree consultation arrangements with them in the near future.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the delivery of the Together: Building a United Community Strategy.

**(AQO 2044/17-22)**

**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.

## Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on works being carried out at Learmount Forest Park, including the Footstick Bridge.

**(AQW 17023/17-22)**

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** Forest Service has over recent months carried out a selected removal of some trees in Learmount forest enabling the remaining trees to have more room to grow and improve both the aesthetic and biodiversity value of the forest.

Tree felling and extraction works are now complete and timber stacked at roadside is expected to be removed by the end of May 2021. Following completion, Forest Service will carry out remedial repair works to forest roads used for timber harvesting operations.

Recreation provision at Learmount is managed in partnership with Derry City and Strabane District Council and works associated with the footstick bridge are undertaken by the Council.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail how much his Department has spent cleaning up (i) illegal dumping on Forest Service land; and (ii) after the dumping of illegal fuel sludge cubes, in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 17179/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Illegal dumping on Forest Service land is a serious and concerning matter. Clean-up operations are the responsibility of Forest Service who manage over 75,000 hectares, often in remote rural areas. Over the past five years expenditure has been in the region of £456,000 and it is shown in the table below.

Financial Year	Expenditure
2016 -17	£52,000
2017-18	£67,000
2018-19	£89,000
2019-20	£66,000
2020-21	£182,000

Forest Service does not hold separate records of expenditure associated specifically with cleaning up dumped fuel sludge cubes, however from operational observation it appears that this has been a minor element of the costs set out above.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the size and location of any areas of East Londonderry which have been (a) designated; or (b) proposed for future woodland expansion as part of the Forests of Our Future programme; and (ii) the species of trees involved.

**(AQW 17293/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** When I launched the Forests for Our Future Programme I wrote to Council Chief Executives and Ministerial colleagues, requesting their support to bring forward suitable public land for afforestation. Forest Service is working with public authorities, including in the East Londonderry area, in the preparation of afforestation plans. I am advised that at this stage almost 40 hectares has been identified as potential for new woodland creation in the area. Additionally 19 applications for 27 hectares of new native woodland have been approved for planting on privately owned land. In preparing and approving the plans, each woodland project is assessed for compliance with UK Forestry Standard and environmental regulations applying to designated areas.

The Forest Service's Forest Expansion Scheme and the Small Woodland Grant Scheme will reopen in summer this year to support new planting in the winter of 2021/22. The Forest Expansion Scheme supports a wide range of species and woodland types including conifer, broadleaf and native trees. The Small Woodland Grant Scheme is designed to support new woodlands with native tree species. I would encourage land owners in East Londonderry with an interest in woodland creation to apply for these schemes.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether there are any Forest Service nurseries in Northern Ireland; and (ii) when the last Forest Service nursery closed.

**(AQW 18436/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Forest Service does not own or manage any tree or plant nurseries in Northern Ireland.

Forest Service produced seedlings and transplants to meet the requirements of its own estate from a single centralised nursery at Castledearg, which ceased plant production in 2009.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the cost (i) of additional (a) vets; (b) environmental health officers; and (c) other ancillary staff required for each border control site at each port in Northern Ireland at present; and (ii) for the projected number required.

**(AQW 18470/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department is responsible for the majority of checks at the portal inspection facilities however checks on High Risk Food Not of Animal Origin and Fish Product are carried out by the following District Councils who also contributed to this response – Mid and East Antrim Council (Larne Port), Belfast Council Port Health Authority (Belfast Council) and Newry and Mourne District Council (Warrenpoint Port).

The annual cost of staff prior to EU Exit, based on salary figures from June 2020, was approximately £1,863,408. The cost of staff currently required at each portal inspection facility is outlined in the table at Annex A below. Resourcing levels do not meet DAERA's requirement as 43 posts are not presently filled. This deficit is particularly marked for vets as only 14 of 29 posts are filled.

The cost of staff required per port for full build permanent facilities will be captured as part of the development of a Full Business Case, work on which is underway. As the proposals for infrastructure will be significant, cross-cutting and controversial, following development of the Full Business case I intend to take options for consideration and decision to the Northern Ireland Executive before commencing building work on the permanent facilities. Annex B provides very approximate staff costs currently being considered for planning purposes. These figures will be kept under continual review and adapted in response to any changes in political agreements. Both recruitment and permanent infrastructure development are currently on hold whilst an alternative is negotiated to replace the Northern Ireland Protocol which is disrupting trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and unnecessarily compromising Northern Ireland traders.

To support the Full Business Case, DAERA is currently conducting a workforce planning exercise to model future resource estimates. The residual uncertainties in this model concern the additional burdens that will result from the end of the current retail grace periods. Much will depend on the supply chains and distribution models used by retailers in future. For example, goods that are currently supplied from Great Britain may be sourced elsewhere and consignments may be consolidated thus reducing certification demand and the clearance procedures necessary as goods pass into Northern Ireland.

Belfast City Council has commented that due to the scale and complexity of the work, they have established an implementation programme team on a short-term basis, to plan and further develop the service during this initial period. In addition to the figures in Annex A, this team includes several other staff, including a Senior Environmental Health Officer (EHO) and a City Protection Manager EHO, as well as programme management support. This is in addition to a small pre-existing team of Port Health EHOs based at the Port Health inspection facility, comprising of 3 other EHOs not included in Annex A.

With regard to future requirements, Belfast City Council states that it is working to plan for what level of service provision will be required once retail grace periods have been removed, at which point they will deliver the full level of checks. It has commented that, "there are challenges in quantifying the scale of the increase in staff numbers required, given the continuing uncertainty in the volume of checks that will eventually be needed". As negotiations at United Kingdom (UK) / European Union level are continuing, a clear timeline for 'phasing in' additional checks once the grace period for retailers expires in October 2021, has not yet been confirmed. The Council may need to increase the staff complement significantly within the current financial year. However in the absence of an agreed timeline being confirmed by UK Government it is not possible to assess what level of increase will actually be required, the timing of when we will need to recruit, and as a result what the additional cost of this will be in this financial year. Office accommodation for any increase in staff numbers is not available in the current temporary facilities. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has also advised that any increase in staffing requirements during this financial year, will require an in-year bid to Government spending monitoring rounds.

FSA and DAERA continue to progress work to gather better volumetric data that could inform workforce planning. Until this work is concluded, we can provide only indicative projections and estimated costs based on FSA and DAERA modelling undertaken in 2020. This data analysis produced estimates based on previous trade flows, which will likely change and adapt, and may be an unreliable indicator of future trade flows. Belfast City Council officials have raised issues with this analysis with FSA and DAERA separately. The modelling deficiencies we are aware of include:

- Gaps within the data used as an input;
- Assumptions used for the time to complete tasks; and
- Analysis of physical space requirements and staff accommodation.

The current FSA model indicates that there would need to be a significant increase in the 'on shift' teams and an associated increase in oversight roles.

It must be stressed that cost estimates are based on the best available data and a range of heavy caveats and assumptions, and exclude the extra costs for larger premises, sampling or other costs associated with a larger staffing model. Therefore, the total cost of a larger service would likely be higher."

#### Annex A - Current resource costs for portal inspection facilities

	Vets including managers (DAERA)	Other ancillary staff (DAERA)	Environmental Health Officers & ancillary staff (District Council)	Total
Belfast	£1,297,927	£1,125,108	£3,300,000*	£5,723,035
Larne	£917,321	£1,396,677	£933,609**	£3,247,607
Warrenpoint	£0	£205,899	£228,425	£434,324
Foyle port and airports	£0	£390,748	£0	£390,748
DAERA Headquarters - administration	£0	£385,315	£0	£385,315
<b>Total</b>	<b>£2,215,248</b>	<b>£3,503,746</b>	<b>£4,462,034</b>	<b>£10,181,028</b>

#### Annex B - Projected resource costs for portal inspection facilities

	Vets including managers (DAERA)	Other ancillary staff (DAERA)	Environmental Health Officers & ancillary staff (District Council)	Total
Belfast	£2,595,854	£2,021,171	£8,100,000*	£12,717,025
Larne	£2,515,868	£2,571,638	£4,519,609**	£9,607,115
Warrenpoint	£79,987	£313,005	£228,425	£621,417
Foyle port and airports	£0	£436,002	£0	£436,002
DAERA Headquarters - administration	£79,987	£983,086	£0	£1,063,073
<b>Total</b>	<b>£5,271,696</b>	<b>£6,324,902</b>	<b>£12,848,034</b>	<b>£24,444,632</b>

\* Figures from Belfast City Council include the additional costs of premises, personal protective equipment, sampling.

\*\* Figures from Mid and East Antrim Council do not include operational costs such as mileage, PPE, IT licenses etc

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what considerations he has given to tougher penalties for repeat offenders under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999.  
(AQW 18510/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** Under the terms of the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, it is an offence to cause pollution of a waterway. Where the source of pollution can be traced, it is the policy of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to take enforcement action against the offender(s). Article 7 of the Water Order provides the Department with the powers to prosecute offenders and Article 8 gives the Department powers to prohibit or place conditions on any activity which has caused the pollution event or which could cause a recurrence. This can be applied to both new and repeat offenders.

The Water (NI) Order 1999 enables the courts to impose a fine of up to £20,000, or a custodial sentence or both on those found guilty of water pollution. The actual sentence applied in individual cases is, of course, a matter for the courts, taking account of the relevant sentencing guidelines.

There are no plans to amend the legislation.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan.  
(AQW 18600/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** The initial All-Ireland Pollinator Plan (AIPP) (2015-20) identified 81 science-based actions to halt the decline of pollinators. All of these actions were delivered by partners, government and non-government bodies, communities and individuals. The plan was supported by over 108 organisations including Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, Ulster Farmers

Union, Ulster Beekeeping Association, Translink, NI Water, Lidl, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, local councils, schools and many other businesses.

The AIPP received international acclaim, providing an exemplar of cross-border partnership delivery within a common framework. It has been used by many countries as a template for their own pollinator plans and strategies

The new All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2021-2025 has built on these successes and includes an ambitious 186 actions to achieve six objectives to protect pollinator food sources and nest sites on both private and public land.

Two representatives from the Department sit on the AIPP Steering Group, reporting back actions and progress, and promoting local measures. Following the first AIPP, a publication was produced summarising completed initial actions entitled 'Working together for Biodiversity', available to download from the All-Ireland Pollinator website <https://pollinators.ie/resources/>

**Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether his Department has been made aware of the river bank erosion occurring at the old landfill site at the Seagoe area of Portadown as a result of items previously placed in the landfill are now falling into the river; and (ii) what plans he has to stop more items from the landfill site falling into the river.

**(AQW 18615/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** NIEA is aware of the erosion along the river bank adjacent to the Seagoe landfill site that was operated by the Local Council at the time. NIEA inspectors have visited the site and did observe materials visible on the river bank but little to no impact on the river itself. There was no evidence of leachate escape or pollution of the river at the time. NIEA has contacted Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and I understand that the Council's officers are investigating the matter.

I am advised that this is an historic landfill that closed in the 1980's when landfills such as this were operated and regulated by local councils. The Landfill Directive (1999/31/EC) was fully transposed in Northern Ireland by the Landfill Regulations (NI) 2003. Landfills that closed prior to the transposition of the Landfill Directive on 16 July 2001 are outside the regulatory remit of my Department.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what was the aggregate amount of net greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland in 1990.

**(AQW 18701/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** In 1990, net greenhouse gas emissions, in Northern Ireland, stood at 24.3 Mt CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent.

This comprised of 26.1 Mt CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent of emissions from sources that were partially offset by 1.8 Mt CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent removed by sinks.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, following his recent statement on the redevelopment of CAFRE's campuses, to detail on the development plans for Greenmount.

**(AQW 18707/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The planned redevelopment at my Department's College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) Greenmount Campus is projected to cost £32m over a 5 year period. The initial contracts for professional services including architectural services and design will be issued in August 2021 and building work will commence in 2023.

The existing buildings will be demolished and new student bedrooms, dining room, classrooms and laboratory, conference hall and office accommodation will be built in their place.

The new buildings will ensure compliance with safeguarding regulations and will be phased so that the work will have minimal impact on existing CAFRE business.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the environmental scope of the full-time and part-time courses currently provided by CAFRE.

**(AQW 18708/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** CAFRE provides a range of courses in agriculture, horticulture, food and equine management from Level 2 to Honours degree and a Master's Degree in Business for Agri-food and Rural Enterprise. Further Education courses (Levels 2 and 3) follow a UK National Curriculum, while Higher Education courses are validated by the two Northern Ireland Universities. Environmental topics are embedded within these qualifications either as standalone units / modules within the overall qualification structure or embedded within the learning outcomes of the qualification units / modules.

The CAFRE Estate is a Leaf Marque (Linking Environment and Farming) accredited facility and students gain experience of environmental sustainable practices implemented on the estate as they develop their practical skills and knowledge.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether there are any plans to further develop the environmental scope of the full-time and part-time courses provided by CAFRE.

**(AQW 18709/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The courses provided by CAFRE are subject to regular review by Awarding Organisations and validating Universities, normally every five years. These reviews are undertaken to ensure that the course content meets the current and future needs of the industry which graduates are planning to enter.

In the 2020/21 academic year, CAFRE revalidated its Foundation degree in Agriculture and Technology and its Foundation degree in Horticulture with Ulster University. A core theme within both programmes is environmental sustainability.

Also in 2020/21 CAFRE validated through Ulster University an Honours Degree in Sustainable Agriculture, a top-up degree in Horticulture and a Level 6 Higher Level Apprenticeship in Food and Drink Manufacture. All three degree programmes cover a broad range of relevant environmental topics. Within the BSc (Hons) in Sustainable Agriculture students can specialise in agri-environment issues.

In addition the environmental component within CAFRE's Further Education courses has increased and as new DAERA policies emerge these will be integrated within the curriculum.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline plans to further develop environmentalism in learning for the next generation of farmers, growers and agri-food personnel.

**(AQW 18710/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department's college, CAFRE, regularly reviews the content of its education courses in line with the requirements set by Awarding Organisations and validating universities to ensure that course content is relevant and meets the needs of the industry which graduates wish to enter, whilst supporting the delivery of my Department's Policy objectives.

CAFRE's curriculum has been revised to reflect an increased focus on environmentalism. The curriculum changes include a greater focus on agri-environment and sustainability across all of our existing Further and Higher Education courses as well as the recent launch of an Honours degree in Sustainable Agriculture which will take in its first group of students in September 2021.

Further development of the curriculum will take place as future policies emerge to promote environmentalism for the next generation of farmers, growers and agri-food personnel.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the university accredited courses currently provided by CAFRE.

**(AQW 18711/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department's College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) delivers a range of Higher Education programmes at undergraduate and post graduate levels across the four disciplines of Agriculture, Food, Horticulture and Equine. All CAFRE undergraduate programmes are validated by Ulster University. CAFRE also delivers the first two years of the BSc (Hons) in Agricultural Technology, which is a Queen's University Belfast (QUB) degree.

The Undergraduate "university accredited" courses currently provided by CAFRE are as follows:

#### **Agriculture**

- BSc (Hons) in Agricultural Technology (QUB degree with CAFRE delivering year 1 and year 2)
- BSc (Hons) in Sustainable Agriculture – Land Management and Agri-Business pathways (commencing September 2021)
- Foundation Degree in Agriculture and Technology

#### **Equine**

- BSc (Hons) in Equine Management
- Foundation Degree in Equine Management

#### **Food**

- BSc (Hons) Degree in Food Technology
- BSc (Hons) Degree in Food Innovation and Nutrition
- BSc (Hons) Degree in Food Business Management
- Foundation Degree in Food Manufacture and Nutrition
- Higher Level Apprenticeship Level 6 in Food and Drink Manufacture, (commencing in September 2021)
- Higher Level Apprenticeship Level 5 in Food and Drink Manufacture

#### **Horticulture**

- BSc (Hons) Degree in Horticulture (commencing in September 2021)
- Foundation Degree in Food Manufacture and Nutrition

In addition CAFRE offers a Master's Degree in Business for Agri-food and Rural Enterprise, which is validated by Queen's University Belfast (QUB).

Further information on all CAFRE education courses can be found on the CAFRE website at [cafre.ac.uk](http://cafre.ac.uk).

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when the Travelling with Pets section of his Department's website will be updated to ensure all pet owners travelling to and from GB are aware of the requirements needed to prevent their pet from being quarantined when they return to NI.

**(AQW 18757/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The information on the 'Travelling with Pets' section of the DAERA website has been reviewed and updated several times in recent months to reflect the developments regarding the requirements and the commencement date for checks in relation to pet travel between Great Britain (GB) and Northern Ireland (NI). The most recent of these updates was made on 11 May 2021.

The 'Travelling with Pets' section fully outlines all the European Union (EU)'s pet travel requirements for pet owners with which compliance is necessary to prevent their pet from being quarantined when they return to NI. The 'Q&As for Pet Travel from 1 January 2021' section which is also regularly updated, most recently 17 May 2021, is available <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/qas-pet-travel-1-january-2021>

My Department is currently considering the next steps with regards to any enforcement of compliance with the EU's requirements for pet travel from GB to NI from 1 July, 2021. The present position is set out in the Department's Compliance protocol, available

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/compliance-protocol-sanitary-phytosanitary-controls-and-point-entry-marketing-standards-checks-gb-ni>. It is my hope however, that sensible and pragmatic solutions can be found before then. In addition, I am continuing to engage with Ministerial colleagues to urgently seek derogations where possible from the unnecessary additional requirements.

My officials will continue to update the DAERA website as the situation develops regarding flexibilities agreed and/or changes to the current enforcement approach. I can assure you that any updates to the DAERA website will allow sufficient time for pet owners to prepare their pets appropriately for travel, in conjunction with their vet. Updates will also be communicated widely through our usual Departmental media channels.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) what action he has taken to enable the free movement of people who use assistance dogs from 1 July 2021; and (ii) what Equality Impact Assessment has been done to ensure the rights of people with disabilities who use assistance dogs are not going to be impacted by a lack of progress in this matter.

**(AQW 18759/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** 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, including assistance and working dogs, between or into European Union Member States, continues to apply in Northern Ireland (NI), following the end of the transition phase. This is as a result of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Northern Ireland Protocol.

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, hobby breeders, and the potential impact on tourism for those wishing to holiday in NI or return to NI from Great Britain (GB) accompanied by their pets.

I have therefore 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. The Commission has responded and technical discussions are ongoing. In the interim, I will continue engagement with Ministerial colleagues to urgently seek derogations where possible from these unnecessary additional requirements.

I have also confirmed, after exploring potential flexibilities, and considering pet owners have not had time to familiarise themselves with the new rules, that DAERA would delay the introduction of any checks on compliance with the EU rules on pet travel from GB to NI until 1 July 2021. As a result, there will be no routine checks on travellers' compliance, until then.

My Department is currently considering the next steps with regards this issue. The present position is set out in the Department's Compliance protocol, available <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/compliance-protocol-sanitary-phytosanitary-controls-and-point-entry-marketing-standards-checks-gb-ni>. It is my hope, however, that from the discussions and processes outlined above, sensible and pragmatic solutions can be found before then.

Any progress made or flexibilities agreed in respect of the additional requirements, along with any changes to the current enforcement approach will be published on the DAERA website at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/travelling-pets>, on

the DAERA Frequently Asked Questions document <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/qas-pet-travel-1-january-2021> and communicated widely through our usual Departmental media channels.

- (ii) An equality screening exercise was carried out by DARD in 2014 regarding changes to the EU Pet Travel Scheme and the proposed amendment of the Non-Commercial Movement of Pet Animals (NI) Order 2011. This screening exercise found that there would be no impact on equality of opportunity and therefore an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) was deemed to be unnecessary.

As outlined, my Department is currently considering the next steps with regards this matter in considering that the EU now defines GB as a third country for the purposes of pet travel. I can assure you that all relevant equality-screening exercises will be carried out, as necessary, with regards to enforcement of the requirements as detailed above. Should the equality screening exercise deem that an EQIA is necessary it will be carried out as required.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how much compensation was paid in 2020/21 for animals slaughtered by his Department.

**(AQW 18766/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** In 2020/21, my Department paid £22,489,334 in compensation for animals slaughtered for disease control purposes. Of this, £22,271,501 was paid in compensation relating to bovine Tuberculosis; £231,833 was paid in compensation relating to avian influenza; and £4,000 was paid in compensation relating to Caprine Arthritis Encephalitis.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the steps being taken to facilitate Northern Irish lobster and crab fishermen selling to EU markets; and for his assessment of how the effects of (a) Brexit and (b) COVID-19 have impacted on this trade.

**(AQW 18824/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department has engaged closely and routinely with stakeholders throughout the pre- and post-transition period of Brexit in order to keep the Northern Ireland Fishing Industry and Seafood Sector informed.

Commencing in July 2020 and running through to the end of the transition period, a number of external webinars have taken place for the Fishing and Aquaculture sectors. These events kept stakeholders up-to-date on new information, emerging issues that had the potential to affect their business, and requirements post-transition. A specific Inshore Fisheries stakeholder event for the crab and lobster sectors was held on 11 December 2020. This included a number of exporters of crab and lobsters, Producer Organisations and fishermen themselves.

In addition a number of one to one meetings have taken place with individual businesses in this sector, the purpose of which was to provide information and a greater understanding of the I/NI Protocol, in order to allow them to look at the EU trading route options available to them.

In terms of an assessment of the impact of Brexit on the sector it has not been reported to us as one of those that has been significantly affected as a result of EU Exit and this is mainly attributed to the fact that the export of both these products has continued, albeit through a direct route to the mainland EU markets via ROI, which has experienced little disruption compared to the problems experienced when exporting from GB to the EU mainland.

This sector has however been significantly affected by the impact of COVID 19 due to the loss of export markets and the closure of the local hospitality sector. In response, since March 2020, my Department has provided the crab and lobster fleet with £394,000 towards their fixed costs of operation to offset lost market opportunities and reduced prices. I have also encouraged such vessels to apply to the UK-wide Seafood Response Fund that provided financial assistance for the same issues relating to the first three months of 2021.

I am committed to engagement with the industry representative groups on this matter. I am always receptive to considering any proposals that may emerge relating to the shipping of produce to established, or indeed new, export markets for our quality shellfish.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his Department's powers in relation to enforcement measures to facilitate fish migration in waterways.

**(AQW 18825/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966, as amended and Sections 54, 58 and 59, in particular, set out my Department's powers to protect fish and facilitate fish (salmon, trout and eel) migration in relation to physical barriers in Northern Ireland.

The Fisheries Act also provides for my Department to grant exemption certificates on application, where it is satisfied that compliance with the Act is not required or in cases, where superior alternative protection measures can be provided. In such cases an exemption permit(s) issued by DAERA will contain such conditions as DAERA considers will be required to ensure fish protection at the site. Any such conditions imposed are legally enforceable to ensure compliance.

Fish migration can also be impacted by in-river works which may include the removal of material from the river bed. Such works in the DAERA area of responsibility require authorisation from my Department, the Loughs Agency have similar powers



in their area. Under Section 48 of the Fisheries Act my Department may issue a permit to allow the planned works to take place, including specific conditions to protect fish stocks which must be adhered to by the applicant.

Water abstraction can impact fish migration, and my Department has powers under the Water Abstraction and Impoundment (Licensing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 to regulate such abstractions. Where a licence to abstract water is issued, water levels of abstraction are regulated to facilitate fish passage at these sites.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in light of the recent pollution events in West Tyrone, to outline how his Department intends to replenishing lost wild fish stock.

**(AQW 18826/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The main fatalities of the recent fish kill were native brown trout, but juvenile Atlantic salmon of different year classes have also perished. The river was located in the Loughs Agency area and they will have a key role in identifying any remedial measures required to assist fish stock recovery in the affected stretch.

The Loughs Agency will seek compensation for any fish mortalities once an offender has been identified and successfully prosecuted in any follow up court action. Any money awarded usually goes to fund habitat enhancement programmes to aid the natural recovery of wild fish populations in the rivers affected, rather than to simply restock with farm reared fish.

Only in exceptional circumstances, for example in cases where the entire fish population has been killed, would stocking be considered. The presumption is to aid the recovery of the remaining fish in affected rivers, rather than restocking. Fish in rivers are often genetically adapted to their particular environment and introduced fish, which are genetically different, can actually pose a risk of weakening the survival of the native fish.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of times his Department has raised concern regarding obstructions to fish migration in waterways in either public or private ownership, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18827/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department has specific powers to deal with obstructions to migratory fish as outlined in various sections of the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 and these apply to salmon, trout and eels. I have provided details below regarding the number of incidences and breaches of legislation, detected by my staff, relating to obstructions to fish migration. Each incident will have resulted in a variety of enforcement action being taken, including prosecution of offenders.

- 2018/19 – 5 incidents under the following sections 48, 54, 58 and 59 of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 involving 5 breaches of this legislation.
- 2019/20 – 7 incidents under the following sections 48, 54, 58 and 59 of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 involving 11 breaches of this legislation
- 2020/21 – 38 incidents under the following sections 48, 54, 56, 58 and 59 of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 involving 55 breaches of this legislation.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of enforcement actions taken against public or private bodies in relation to obstructions to fish migration in waterways, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18828/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department has specific powers to deal with obstructions to migratory fish as outlined in various sections of the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966.

I have provided details below regarding the number of incidences and breaches of legislation, detected by my staff, relating to obstructions to fish migration. Each incident will have resulted in a variety of enforcement action being taken, including prosecution of offenders.

- 2018/19 – 5 incidents under the following sections 48, 54, 58 and 59 of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 involving 5 breaches of this legislation.
- 2019/20 – 7 Incidents under the following sections 48, 54, 58 and 59 of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 involving 11 breaches of this legislation
- 2020/21 – 38 Incidents under the following sections 48, 54, 56, 58 and 59 of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 involving 55 breaches of this legislation.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his Department's assessment of the effect that municipal waste incineration will have on his Department's climate objectives.

**(AQW 18852/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Addressing Climate Change in Northern Ireland is a priority for my Department and I want to ensure that Northern Ireland plays its part in minimising greenhouse gas emissions.

I have commissioned resources in my Department to deliver on the commitment made by the Executive in the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement regarding a Climate Change Act for Northern Ireland. I want to introduce this Bill and see it complete its legislative passage within the lifetime of the current Assembly mandate.

As previously advised (AQW 17135/17-22 refers) 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.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans his Department has to increase animal welfare standards for the local pig farming industry.  
(AQW 18853/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** I am committed to ensuring that Northern Ireland remains at the forefront of animal welfare standards. At present, however, I do not have any plans to introduce any changes to existing standards as I am satisfied that they are sufficiently robust.

Welfare standards for pigs, and indeed for all farmed animals, are protected and enforced by my Department under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, and the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012.

The Regulations transpose into Northern Ireland law EU requirements on welfare standards for farmed animals.

I can also assure you that my Department also has in place a robust inspection and enforcement regime, and DAERA veterinary officials investigate any potential breaches of the legislation governing the welfare of pigs.

Furthermore, my Department has published codes of practice for farmed animals, including one for pigs. The Code of Practice for Pigs provides practical guidance regarding owning and keeping pigs, under all husbandry systems. Codes are reviewed in line with scientific developments.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department is taking to increase uptake of environmental land management schemes amongst agricultural businesses.  
(AQW 18854/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** The Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) is the main environmental land management scheme in Northern Ireland. The first EFS agreements commenced in 2017 and, following four tranches, there are now approximately 5,000 EFS Agreement Holders. In advance of, and during, the opening of each EFS application period my officials conduct a promotional press campaign, and highlight the scheme through social media channels and on the DAERA website where information is continually available.

The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) also holds information events to support farmers in their applications, option selection and scheme understanding, at appropriate times of the year.

EFS Group projects are funded to encourage scheme uptake and support EFS agreement holders in specific, targeted areas, such as environmentally designated land, priority habitat, or water catchments. EFS Group projects are delivered by independent facilitator organisations and the five projects in place support over 500 Group members.

Scheme officials, working closely with NIEA and using geographic information system technology, have proactively contacted businesses within priority river catchments or priority habitat areas.

Throughout the year, the scheme regularly features in the Farm Advisory Service newsletter which issues to all farm businesses in Northern Ireland from CAFRE. In addition, the benefits of EFS and environmentally sensitive farming in general, are promoted through the Business Development Groups, led by CAFRE and, in particular, to the new Environmental Development Groups.

**Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his Department's assessment of the effectiveness of the existing legislative framework on agricultural waste management.  
(AQW 18855/17-22)

**Mr Poots:** In the past, agricultural waste was not covered by general waste controls. However, the same regulations that apply to commercial and industrial waste now also apply to agricultural waste. Therefore a farm business that produces waste has duty of care obligations for that waste which means that a farmer must ensure that:

- the waste does not escape their control and that it does not cause pollution or harm while they hold it;
- they can demonstrate that they have taken into account the waste hierarchy when making decisions on the management of their waste;
- they only pass waste to someone who is authorised to take it. If they do not check, and the person they have passed their waste to disposes of it illegally, they may be held responsible, prosecuted and fined.
- they must keep records of all transfers of their waste.

The duty of care has no time limit. A farm business is specifically responsible for its waste from when it is produced until it has been transferred to an authorised person. If the farm business believes that its waste is not being managed correctly it must take action to check and prevent this.

In terms of the effectiveness of the existing legislative framework I can confirm that my officials in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency are content that the legislation governing agricultural waste is sufficient for their regulatory function.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to an introduction of a common travel area for pets travelling between GB, NI and the Republic of Ireland (i) for an update on the joint UK/ROI/NI working group; and (ii) whether his Department has received any correspondence from the UK Government or the European Commission.

**(AQW 18860/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I have written to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice MP, and to the European Commission, requesting that urgent consideration be given to the introduction of a 'Common Travel Area' for pets travelling between Great Britain (GB), Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (RoI). A joint UK/NI/RoI working group was established to consider where flexibilities can be achieved, and I can advise that this group has met on a number of occasions. To date, no decisions or proposals have been made by the group, however, the group will continue to engage and consider options on these issues.

This matter has also been escalated by the UK Government to the European Commission seeking urgent resolution. The Commission responded in writing on 10 February 2021. The UK Government is aware of the serious concerns and this issue is part of the ongoing discussions on the implementation of the Protocol between the European Union and United Kingdom (UK). In the interim, I will continue engagement with Ministerial colleagues to urgently seek derogations where possible from the entirely unnecessary additional requirements, in particular the need for rabies vaccination and tapeworm treatment, given that both the UK and the RoI are considered free from both diseases.

I am acutely aware of the impact of what I consider to be the completely unnecessary new measures on those travelling within the United Kingdom as a result of the Withdrawal Agreement and the NI Protocol. I am particularly concerned about the significant implications for guide dog users, those travelling with pets to attend shows and exhibitions, 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.

I have confirmed, after exploring potential flexibilities, and considering pet owners have not had time to familiarise themselves with the new rules, that DAERA would delay the introduction of any checks on compliance with the EU rules on pet travel from GB to NI until 1 July 2021. As a result there will be no routine checks on travellers' compliance until then.

My Department is currently considering the next steps with regards this issue. The present position is set out in the Department's Compliance protocol, available <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/compliance-protocol-sanitary-phytosanitary-controls-and-point-entry-marketing-standards-checks-gb-ni> It is my hope, however, that from the discussions and processes outlined above, sensible and pragmatic solutions can be found before then.

Any progress made or flexibilities agreed in respect of the additional requirements, along with any changes to the current enforcement approach will be published on the DAERA website <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/travelling-pets>, on the DAERA Frequently Asked Questions document <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/qas-pet-travel-1-january-2021> and communicated widely through our usual Departmental media channels.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 18087/17-22 and in relation to the potential centralisation of funding, for his assessment of the deliverability of local priorities in regards to the future of agriculture.

**(AQW 18889/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I understand that the UK leaving the EU will have created some uncertainty regarding agricultural funding.

UK Government has committed to maintain the funding available to farmers and land managers in every year of this Parliament, supplementing the remaining EU funding that farmers and land managers across the UK will receive for agri-environment and rural development projects.

It is clear that business as usual in relation to agricultural support is not an option. The future is about doing more with the funding at our disposal in a sustainable and smart way. As we redefine our agricultural policies and support schemes outside of the EU, I intend to provide opportunities for all of our farmers. Schemes and support are needed to help farmers develop their businesses, no matter where they farm, to become more efficient and to maximise the sustainable returns they can achieve from the assets at their disposal.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to detail any plans or options he has to facilitate an increase in the farm-gate prices that smaller, family-owned farms receive for their meat; and (ii) for his assessment of the threat of industrial farming on such farms.

**(AQW 18901/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Farms operate within an open competitive environment where it is not possible, nor desirable, to engineer a situation where a particular subset of farms face a different price regime for a given product. Product differentiation is, of course, possible, (e.g. organic production) but that is not necessarily related to farm size.

'Industrial' farming is an emotive term with no particular definition. I recognise that for economic reasons, average farm sizes have been increasing for many generations and that today's modest family farm would probably seem large and "industrial" to our forebearers. In developing a new agricultural support framework, I am considering the needs of the entire farming sector. It has been a long time since we have been able to shape farm policy to the needs of our farmers and I want to make the most of this new opportunity.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for an update on his engagement with farmers and the Northern Ireland Hemp Association regarding the expansion of the industry; and (ii) for his assessment of the opportunities available to farmers of developing hemp production on land currently used for other types of farming.  
**(AQW 18902/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My response dated 8 October 2021 to your AQW 7703/17-22 outlined the engagement there had been between my officials and hemp farmers and the Northern Ireland Hemp Association at that time. There has been no further engagement on the matter since then.

My Department has not, at present, conducted any assessment of the potential for developing hemp production on land currently used for other types of farming.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the learning from monitoring wastewater for COVID-19 in Northern Ireland  
**(AQW 18916/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The DAERA and Science Foundation Ireland co-funded a research project to establish an integrated system for all-island SARS-CoV-2 (coronavirus) wastewater surveillance and reporting was completed at the end of March 2021.

Under the project, the Queens University Belfast (QUB) established a wastewater epidemiology capability and methodologies to track SARS-CoV-2 viral levels in wastewater samples.

Wastewater sampling commenced at 2 sites on 11th January 2021 and processing of samples on 26th January 2021. On the 19th April 2021 additional sampling commenced at a further 12 sites across the province covering approximately 36% of the population of the province.

Results to-date indicate varying levels of coronavirus in wastewater treatment works sampled and trends are in line with clinical testing trends. Wastewater surveillance is currently being used to inform and support public health interventions across Northern Ireland. This work has involved close cooperation between Queen's University Belfast, DAERA, Department of Health, Public Health Agency and Northern Ireland Water.

My officials have continued to work with DEFRA, other Devolved Administrations and Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), to inform development of a NI programme for SARS-CoV-2 (coronavirus) surveillance in wastewater.

DAERA officials are continuing to work collaboratively with counterparts in the Department for Health (DoH), the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the Department for Infrastructure and Northern Ireland Water (NIW) to progress the development of an effective cross-departmental approach to wastewater surveillance.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his Department's estimate of the percentage of laws affecting Northern Ireland's environment and agriculture which now fall to be made not in Belfast or London, but in Brussels.

**(AQW 18919/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The legislation with which Northern Ireland will need to comply is specified in Annex 2 of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol. The remainder of the body of EU legislation was moved to retained legislation in UK law as a consequence of the EU (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020. No attempt has been made to quantify what proportion of law is covered by the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol vs retained law nor is it likely that any analysis could be undertaken in any meaningful way given the huge diversity and scope of law that might fall into such an analysis.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the percentage of lamb and beef, and derived products, sold in Northern Ireland that originate from outside (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the UK; and (c) the UK and EU combined; and (ii) any steps being made to incentivise companies and supermarkets to use Northern Irish beef and lamb.

**(AQW 18962/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** HMRC Regional Trade Statistics show that Northern Ireland imported meat and meat preparations (this includes pig and poultry meat) with a value of £442m from EU and £4m from non-EU in 2020. However, these figures do not necessarily reflect the country of origin of the product but only where the product was purchased from by the Northern Ireland importer. There are no equivalent figures available for trade from GB to NI. The Department does not hold any statistics on the origin of meat and meat products sold in Northern Ireland.

I am passionate about promoting our Northern Ireland food products. My own ambition is for Northern Ireland to be recognised both at home and abroad as a world-class food-producing region, known for its sustainability, quality, safety and knowledge based approach. I have written to the main NI retailers to encourage them to make greater use of product sourced from NI farmers.

In addition I have recently opened my Department's Northern Ireland Regional Food Programme, which seeks to raise the profile of quality regional food. This year the programme will also provide support for a NI consumer focused promotional campaign. This campaign will cover all sectors of the NI food industry highlighting the quality, sustainability and reputation of the food that is produced on local farms.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether any foreign companies currently trading in Northern Ireland, under his departmental portfolio, have access to the Investor Court System or the Investor-State Dispute Settlement.

**(AQW 18983/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Investment protection provisions within trade agreements are not part of my Department's remit. Trade agreements are reserved and this issue is therefore a matter for the Department for International Trade.

**Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the grants available to the food processing industry, including farms with butchery.

**(AQW 19045/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** There are no grants available from my Department for the food processing industry. My officials are currently processing a number of Expressions of Interest under the pilot Micro Food Business Investment Scheme which closed on 15 April 2021. The outputs and an evaluation of the scheme will help inform the need for any similar support going forward.

The focus of grant support available from my Department is for primary agricultural and horticultural production. Letters of Offer are currently being processed under the recent tranche 3 of my Department's Farm Business Improvement Scheme-Capital Tier 1 which supports on-farm investment projects to improve the sustainability of agricultural production holdings.

I have commissioned, jointly with Minister Dodds, the Independent Strategic Review of the NI Agri-Food Sector (ISRAF), which is considering the challenges facing both the food processing and primary agriculture industries as well as making recommendations on how to take full advantage of new opportunities.

**Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he is aware of a technical issue with the website which prevented farmers from completing transfer of entitlements by the deadline on 4 May 2021.

**(AQW 19068/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** I am not aware of any technical issues with my Department's website which prevented farmers completing entitlement transfers by the deadline. The website was operational throughout the application window, from 1 March to 4 May 2021. During this period my Department received a total of 6,876 transfer applications online, the last of which was submitted at 11.59pm on 4 May.

The Transfer Service was also supported by a skilled Advisory Team who were available to provide guidance and support to farm businesses if required.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant AQW 18264/17-22, (i) to detail any legislation that prohibits the lighting of fires on land owned by NIEA; and (ii) how any such legislation is enforced.

**(AQW 19073/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** There are a number of pieces of legislation relating to the issue of wildfires and / or prescribed burning on protected sites. The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 relate to designated sites, and The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 (As amended) relating to protected species across Northern Ireland.

Other legislation relating to wildfires includes The Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928, The Accidental Fires Act (Northern Ireland) 1944, The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, The Criminal Damage (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, The Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 & The Fire and Rescue Services (Emergencies) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Whilst there is no legislation that specifically prohibits the lighting of fires on lands owned by NIEA, this issue would be governed by the same legislation regulating the lighting of fires in general.

It would be a matter for the designated authority to investigate and to enforce any offences under the terms of the relevant legislation in accordance with the powers given.

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has any plans to make it illegal to sell horticultural peat in Northern Ireland in line with the recent decision announced in England.

**(AQW 19105/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** My Department currently has no plans to make it illegal to sell horticultural peat in Northern Ireland. I have approved a consultation on a draft Peatland Strategy which is intended to set out objectives for the protection and management of peatlands to ensure their future sustainability.

It is my intention to develop an Implementation Plan for the strategy which will take account of issues relating to the extraction and use of peat and peat-based products in Northern Ireland, including any future legislative needs.

**Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline any studies, or any other information, on the benefits of covering slurry tanks.

**(AQW 19114/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** Putting a cover on an above-ground store or lagoon decreases airflow across the surface and reduces the amount of ammonia emitted into the air. This helps retain valuable nutrients within the slurry and can reduce the amount of any additional chemical fertiliser required. Impermeable slurry store covers will also prevent rain from filling the storage. This can result in more predictable store capacity and, with less water, there will be less slurry volume to store, haul and apply. Costs associated with storage, haulage and application of slurry may be reduced, particularly in areas of high rainfall. Covering slurry stores is highlighted within the Code of Good Agricultural Practice for the Reduction of Ammonia Emissions, available at the link below;

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/code-of-good-agricultural-practice-for-the-reduction-of-ammonia-emissions.pdf>

The addition of a solid cover to a manure store may reduce ammonia emissions by up to 80%. Floating covers may reduce emissions by 60%. These assessments of ammonia reduction are informed by the United Nations' Economic and Social Council's Guidance document on preventing and abating ammonia emissions from agricultural sources, available at the link below;

[https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/documents/2012/EB/ECE\\_EB.AIR\\_120\\_ENG.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/documents/2012/EB/ECE_EB.AIR_120_ENG.pdf)

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the effect to local farmers of NI being subject to a zero-tariff, zero-quota trade deal with Australia.

**(AQW 19151/17-22)**

**Mr Poots:** The agreement of such a deal presents a high level of risk to farmers in Northern Ireland and across the UK, particularly in the beef and sheep sectors. Australia has a number of distinct advantages over Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK in terms of the land available for farming, climate and lower standards that allows its farmers to have considerably lower costs of production. Australian beef and sheep products have the potential to undercut UK producers and to reduce Northern Ireland's market share in GB which is our most important market for these products.

I have long maintained that tariff & quota protection must be retained for sensitive agricultural products and have emphasised the importance of this to UK Government Ministers. I have written to Defra Secretary of State George Eustice to express my strong opposition to the prospect of a zero tariff, zero quota Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the UK and Australia and will continue to make this case to the Government.

## Department for Communities

**Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the status of the Derry Housing Executive Business Case; and funding for the dispersed and emergency accommodation project for the city.

**(AQW 17233/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):** The Housing Executive has provided this response.

The development of additional services within Derry city is a priority for the Housing Executive due to the scale of demand within the area. As part of this development of additional services, the Housing Executive will continue to explore the opportunity to develop dispersed intensively managed emergency accommodation in Derry city.

After recently receiving confirmation of funding allocations for 2021/2022 the Housing Executive will endeavour to progress the development of a

Derry based Dispersed Intensively managed emergency scheme within this financial year.

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of the investment that her Department has made in the Triangle area of the Waterside, Foyle, over the past five years.

**(AQW 18272/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** A new Social Housing scheme is currently under construction adjacent to 66 Duke Street, which will deliver 42 units. Work started on-site in March 2019 and is due to be completed in October 2021. The total associated Housing Association Grant is £3.72m.

Category	Area	2015/16 £	2016/17 £	2017/18 £	2018/19 £	2019/20 £
Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP - New Build)	Triangle Area,Foyle	0	0	0	0	£3.72m

While there has been no direct financial investment through Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund to the Triangle area over the past five years, DfC provide funding to Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership for a Strategy Manager who liaises with and supports all groups in the Waterside Neighbourhood Renewal Area. The Strategy Manager provides support and engages with the residents in the Triangle area to identify need, with a view to developing the most effective and efficient services, projects and interventions that will deliver on the areas identified priorities.

The Government Funding Database is a public database that holds records of applications from and funding to voluntary and community sector organisations. You may find it helpful to search the database to obtain details of funding awarded to specific organisations registered within this area. Please note, information within the database is held according to the registered address of the organisation, which may not correspond to the location of the group benefitting from the funding awarded. The Government Funding Database can be accessed at: <https://govfundingpublic.nics.gov.uk/Search.aspx>

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the number of people in Newry and Armagh on the housing waiting list with the Housing Executive or a Housing Association in each month of the last three years; and (ii) the number of people deemed homeless in Newry and Armagh in each month of the last three years.

**(AQW 18477/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive does not report the housing waiting list information on a monthly basis but does so quarterly. It has provided the following table detailing the quarterly waiting list numbers for the Newry and Armagh Parliamentary Constituency for the last three years.

Newry & Armagh Parliamentary Constituency	All Applicants
Mar-18	1898
Jun-18	1876
Sep-18	2055
Dec-18	2078
Mar-19	2046
Jun-19	2086
Sep-19	2079
Dec-19	1988
Mar-20	2007
Jun-20	2106
Sep-20	2184
Dec-20	2228
Mar-21	2297

While the Housing Executive does not hold homeless data on a Parliamentary Constituency basis, it does retain data for Council Areas. The monthly Homeless Acceptance figures for those accepted as homeless for both the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and for the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Area are provided below. These figures cover the last 3 years from 1st April 2018 to 31st March 2021.

#### Homeless Acceptances in the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Area

Month / Year	2018	2019	2020	2021
January	N/A	74	107	83
February	N/A	97	83	68
March	N/A	77	44	71
April	68	58	50	N/A
May	107	74	48	N/A
June	71	61	79	N/A

Month / Year	2018	2019	2020	2021
July	67	68	70	N/A
August	74	77	56	N/A
September	69	81	94	N/A
October	71	74	69	N/A
November	94	67	63	N/A
December	38	53	41	N/A

#### Homeless Acceptances Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council Area

Month / Year	2018	2019	2020	2021
January	N/A	77	62	58
February	N/A	63	44	48
March	N/A	75	30	67
April	54	79	33	N/A
May	68	61	32	N/A
June	62	79	58	N/A
July	66	48	52	N/A
August	68	55	42	N/A
September	82	75	69	N/A
October	73	65	54	N/A
November	61	65	52	N/A
December	41	31	43	N/A

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of public sector homes in (i) Northern Ireland; (ii) Belfast; and (iii) East Belfast regarded as being under occupied.

**(AQW 18504/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Information requested is available for Housing Executive tenants only.

The definition of under-occupation differs between the Social Sector Size Criteria rules and the Housing Selection Scheme rules therefore this response cites two separate data sources which define and address under-occupation differently. They should not be conflated or aggregated in any way, as this may lead to double-counting.

The level of under-occupation as determined by the Social Sector Size Criteria rules apply only to tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit and the Housing Executive has advised that the latest available figures for these are as follows;

**Total:** 22,660

**Belfast:** 5,893

**South & East Belfast:** 1,852. It is not possible to provide a breakdown for East Belfast only)

In the context of the Housing Selection Scheme (HSS), under-occupation points may be awarded to a tenant of a Participating Landlord if their current accommodation exceeds the needs of their household, and all other persons residing in the dwelling, in respect of the number and size of available bedrooms. Guidance on bedroom requirements from the HSS is available at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/changes-to-housing-benefit>. This guidance is used by the designated officer in determining whether under-occupation points are applicable. Please note that under-occupation points are only available to Transfer Applicants.

The number of Housing Executive Transfer Applicants on the social housing waiting list at 30th April 2021 who have been awarded housing needs points due to under-occupation of their home is;

**Total:** 3493

**Belfast (combined Parliamentary Constituencies):** 1095

**East Belfast Parliamentary Constituency:** 19



**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities (i) for her assessment of the Report on Standards of Decision Making by the Department for Communities in 2017/2018; and (ii) what steps her Department intends to take to improve initial decision making.

**(AQW 18516/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I note the comments from the Independent Chairperson who in the report foreword states “with regard to the standard of decision making, the report indicates, the performance of decision makers has been satisfactory this year with small percentage variances from the benchmark standards and provides assurance that procedures to secure on-going improvement of the service are in place”.

The 2019 report which was recently published shows an improvement in overall performance from the 2018 position against the benchmarks set. Moving forward the Department will look to maintain the gains already made and seek to drive further improvement.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Communities how many requests her Department received for the translation of documents into (i) Irish; and (ii) Ulster Scots, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18568/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Before the establishment of the Central Translation Hub on the 19th April 2021 the Department for Communities did not have responsibility for the provision of translation services.

As at 18th May 2021 the Translation Hub has received 21 requests for Irish translation and 5 requests for Ulster-Scots translation.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for Communities how many people have fallen into rent arrears since the start of the pandemic.

**(AQW 18599/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive has advised that of its tenants there are 22,356 who previously had a clear rent account that went into arrears after the emergence of COVID-19. 11,932 of these tenants subsequently have come out of arrears, leaving 10,410 new gross arrears cases at 09 May 2021.

In terms of those tenants renting from Registered Housing Associations the Department does not hold up-to-date information but has been conducting Covid-19 surveys to determine the impact of the pandemic on RHAs and tenants. However while these surveys asked about overall arrears, they did not enquire about the number of tenants who had fallen into arrears.

The Department does not hold information regarding rent arrears for those tenants in the private rented sector.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities when she will amend departmental policy to enable regeneration funding for rural towns with a population over 2500, such as Portaferry.

**(AQW 18606/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I have initiated discussions with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Department for Infrastructure, who also have a role, on developing a more collaborative approach to rural regeneration.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many households in the private rented sector are in receipt of Local Housing Allowance, through universal credit housing costs, and through housing benefit; (ii) how many of those households have rents that exceed the local housing allowance (LHA); and (iii) of these households what the median average gap is between the rent and the LHA, for each broad rental market area, for the most recent period for which data is available since the realignment of LHA to the 30th percentile.

**(AQW 18618/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:**

- (i) As at the end of March 2021, there were 32,506 households in the Private rented sector in receipt of Universal Credit. The number of claimants in receipt of Housing Benefit who are impacted by Local Housing Allowance (LHA) is currently 31,620.
- (ii) Of the Universal Credit cases, 28,589 were in receipt of an LHA-capped housing payment that was lower than their declared rent. The Housing Executive has advised that information to answer parts (ii) and (iii) is not available for Housing Benefit claimants.
- (iii) For Universal Credit cases, the median gap between rent and LHA for each of the broad rental market areas is shown below:

Broad Rental Market Area	Median gap
Belfast	£120.30
Lough Neagh Lower	£138.48
Lough Neagh Upper	£111.29

Broad Rental Market Area	Median gap
North	£106.70
North West	£113.61
South	£139.39
South East	£110.48
South West	£124.64

For those people who experience a shortfall between their rent and the amount of Local Housing Allowance payable for their particular household needs, further financial help may be available through the Discretionary Housing Payment Scheme.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 15238/17-22, for an explanation for the reduction in claimants from 2016-20 from 510 to 180.

**(AQW 18624/17-22)**

**Ms Hargrey:** A comparison over the four year period from 2016- 20 cannot be made as the figures provided in AQW 15238 /17-22 are yearly figures which will vary depending on the number and type of claims received and processed each year where Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is identified as the main disabling condition.

Applicants who suffer from ADHD often suffer from a number of comorbidities which can affect them to a lesser or greater extent than their ADHD. In instances where the comorbidity results in greater needs than their ADHD, then ADHD would not be recorded as the main disabling condition. This may also account for fluctuations in yearly figures.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Communities what further steps she is taking to ensure that workers are aware of their entitlements if required to self-isolate to stop the spread of Coronavirus.

**(AQW 18625/17-22)**

**Ms Hargrey:** Detailed information on the current financial support available is on the niDirect website and this is updated regularly.

The Public Health Agency (PHA) has included a link to the niDirect Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Benefits webpage under the heading - Financial Support and Practical help.

Anyone in need of further support, including those who have been identified as clinically extremely vulnerable, can contact the COVID-19 Community Helpline (Freephone 0808 802 0020, Email: covid19@adviceni.net. Text: ACTION to 81025) which provides personalised advice and referral to appropriate support depending on an individual's circumstances.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities to detail any grant schemes or financial assistance available from her Department to sports clubs to enhance security of their premises.

**(AQW 18713/17-22)**

**Ms Hargrey:** Sports clubs should continue to monitor the SportNI website at <http://www.sportni.net/funding/> to identify any suitable capital programmes which may become available.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities (i) how much has been allocated for neighbourhood renewal in each of the last five years; (ii) what evaluations are made to determine value for money of that expenditure; and (iii) what outcomes are used to measure those evaluations.

**(AQW 18720/17-22)**

**Ms Hargrey:**

- (i) The table attached at Annex A details how much has been allocated for neighbourhood renewal in each of the last five years to 2020/21 for both capital and revenue projects.
- (ii) At between six and twelve months after project completion, Post Project Evaluations (PPE) are completed to determine the value for money of the expenditure. The PPE compares outturn against the estimated costs and benefits identified at the initial assessment stage and generally reviews success in achieving objectives.
- (iii) Currently, the NR model is output focused with progress at project level being monitored and reported through NR Outcomes and Indicators. These provide a common set of project output and outcome indicators agreed for Neighbourhood Renewal supported projects. However work is ongoing on a strategic review of People and Place as part of the Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy to move to an outcomes based methodology in line with the Programme for Government's Outcomes Framework.

## Annex A

	2016/2017		2017/2018		2018/2019		2019/2020		2020/2021	
	Awarded Revenue Amount	Awarded Capital Amount	Awarded Revenue Amount	Awarded Capital Amount	Awarded Revenue Amount	Awarded Capital Amount	Awarded Revenue Amount	Awarded Capital Amount	Awarded Revenue Amount	Awarded Capital Amount
<b>Totals</b>	<b>£18,660,182</b>	<b>£5,630,223</b>	<b>£18,067,180</b>	<b>£4,089,552</b>	<b>£17,428,886</b>	<b>£2,984,480</b>	<b>£17,604,880</b>	<b>£3,914,552</b>	<b>£17,053,471</b>	<b>£1,788,948</b>

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities how many responses were received to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive consultation on its proposed Cavity Wall Action Plan.

**(AQW 18722/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Housing Executive received a total of seven responses to its proposed Draft Cavity Wall Insulation Action Plan consultation.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Communities whether she will meet with me to discuss governance at Mid and East Antrim Borough Council.

**(AQW 18751/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Private Office has responded to you on this matter.

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 17715/17-22, how many cancellations due to a no reply to a renewal reminder subsequently reappeared.

**(AQW 18840/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive has advised that over the 5 year period from 01 April 2016 to present, there were 28,460 applications cancelled because of 'no reply to reminder'. 7,028 of these resulted in a subsequent reapplication.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 17041/17-22, (i) to detail the reasons for non-capture of waiting list data for by children waiting for Pica assessment; and (ii) whether there are any plans to capture this information going forward across all Health and Social Care Trusts.

**(AQW 18844/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Pica assessment is an issue that can be identified through a range of programmes and services, therefore the capture of data would be dependent on the service to which the child was referred.

However, this is an operational matter for individual Health and Social Care Trusts and the Department is not aware of any plans to capture waiting list data in relation to pica assessment for children going forward.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the introduction of the Welfare Mitigation Bill.

**(AQW 18859/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** A draft Bill to provide for the extension of the Social Sector Size Criteria welfare mitigation scheme has been shared with Executive colleagues.

Pending approval, my Department will continue to make payments under the sole authority of the relevant Budget Act. This will ensure that eligible people are not disadvantaged.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 18269 17-22, (i) why her Department does not hold records relating to the grant funding of the construction of the Derry Northside shopping centre; (ii) what happened to the legacy records from the Department for Social Development; and (iii) how long records in relation to substantial grant funding are stored.

**(AQW 18865/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department does not hold records in relation to the grant funding of the construction of the Derry Northside Shopping Centre as legacy records for grant funding back to this period were destroyed in accordance with the terms and condition of the funding programme and in line with Departmental retention and disposal policy at the time.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities to outline her Department's next steps regarding the establishment of a mortgage support scheme following the receipt of Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre's research findings, expected later this month.

**(AQW 18909/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The research has not yet been completed. Decisions on the way forward cannot be taken until the report is received and the content considered by the Department.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities whether the findings of Ulster University Economic Policy Centre's research on developing a mortgage support scheme will be made publicly available.

**(AQW 18910/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The research report has not yet been completed. A decision on publication cannot be taken until the content of the report is considered and assessed for any commercially sensitive material it may contain.

**Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities how many applicants have been on the housing waiting list for (i) 1-2 years; (ii) 2-3 years; (iii) 3-4 years; (iv) 4-5 year; and (v) more than 5 years.

**(AQW 18921/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Housing Executive has provided the following table detailing the number of applicants on the waiting list for i) less than 1 year; ii) 1-2 years; iii) 2-3 years; iv) 3-4 years; v) 4-5 years and vi) and more than 5 years as at 31 March 2021.

End of March 2021	Applicants
Less than 1 year	11,337
1-2 Years	9,505
2-3 Years	6,359
3-4 Years	4,045
4-5 Years	2,853
Over 5 Years	9,872
<b>Total</b>	<b>43,971</b>

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities what criteria was used in the selection and allocation of the money for female sport within the Sports Sustainability Fund; and how grassroots clubs and eligible organisations were made aware of the funding opportunities.

**(AQW 18922/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Sports Sustainability Fund was open for recognised sports Governing Bodies to apply to on behalf of either their affiliated clubs and/or the Governing Body itself. All applicants committed to the programme principles of equality, diversity and inclusion and were required to ensure that the needs of all parts of their sport (or club) were taken into consideration, and treated equitably, in submitting their application. Funding for female sport will therefore be included within club applications.

Increasing participation in sport and physical activity, particularly amongst females and other under-represented groups, is a priority for my Department and that commitment will be reflected in the new strategy for Sport and Physical Activity.

In relation to how grassroots clubs and eligible organisations were made aware of the funding, Sport NI held six briefing sessions and clinics with governing bodies prior to and over the course of the application period to provide information on the process and how to complete the application forms. Sport NI publicised the programme information through its social media channels (website, Facebook and Twitter) throughout the period it was open to applications. Eligible sport Governing Bodies similarly publicised the programme to their own clubs through their own social media channels, direct communication and also held information sessions specific to their own clubs.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities to provide a rationale for why, out of 19 financial awards made under the Sports Sustainability Fund, 16 were made to Gaelic sports associations and clubs, with 3 being awarded to all other sports associations and clubs.

**(AQW 18923/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The information outlined in your question is incorrect.

Full details of the breakdown are available at:

<http://www.sportni.net/funding/our-funding-programmes/sports-sustainability-fund/sports-sustainability-fund-awards-list/>

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities how many Housing Executive tenants are living in fuel poverty.

**(AQW 18936/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The most recent estimate of fuel poverty by tenure was calculated based on the data gathered in the 2016 House Condition Survey. At that time, approximately 22% of all households here (159,530) were in fuel poverty.

In terms of Housing Executive-owned dwellings, ten per cent of its households (7,950) were estimated to be in fuel poverty in.

The Housing Executive plans to carry out the next full House Condition Survey in 2022, and will provide updated fuel poverty statistics by tenure.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities whether she will publish the Home Energy Conservation Authority's response to the Housing Executive's consultation on its Cavity Wall Action Plan.

**(AQW 18937/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Sustainable Development Manager, who leads on HECA activities within the Housing Executive, was a member of the internal working group that prepared the Draft Cavity Wall Insulation Action Plan. Thus HECA has not produced a separate response, but I am assured that its insight and experience have contributed to the Cavity Wall Action Plan through its membership of the working group.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the number of regular volunteers operating in Northern Ireland; and (ii) the estimated amount these volunteers save the public purse each year.

**(AQW 18961/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The most recent NISRA survey data on volunteering shows that approximate 28% of the population aged sixteen and over regularly volunteer. This equates to an estimated 416,948 people aged sixteen or over regularly volunteering.

Estimates of value are based on the number of volunteers, hours of volunteering, the type of volunteering and the national/regional average wage.

Based on an assumption that volunteers offer 2 hours per week of their time and valuing this at the average hourly wage we would estimate the economic value of volunteering in 2019/20 to be approximately £566million.

**Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 17744/17-22, whether Irish Medium Education schools have to pay for translation services through her Department's translation hub.

**(AQW 18988/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Executive agreed the way forward for the Translation Hub should be a phased approach which includes an in-house translation team moving to a hybrid model which will also allow access to an outsourced framework contract providing translation for all languages, use of this contract will incur a charge.

Where there is capacity to undertake translation in-house there will be no charge for the service

If demand for translations exceeds the capacity of the in-house team, as it is expected to do, the hub can arrange for the translation to be undertaken by a third party contractor. Officials have met with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and further meetings are planned to ensure efficient access to the service for Irish medium schools.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities given that gas is currently more expensive than oil, contributes to the net zero carbon target, and is a carbon emitting fossil fuel, for her assessment of the success of the Affordable Warmth Scheme in addressing fuel poverty.

**(AQW 19001/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Fuel poverty is defined as needing to spend more than 10% of the total household income on all fuel use to maintain a satisfactory level of heating, that is, 21°C in the living room and 18°C in other occupied rooms. It is generally caused by a combination of three factors, poor household energy efficiency, low income and fuel costs.

The Affordable Warmth Scheme is the Executive's main intervention to fight the effects of fuel poverty by providing a range of heating and insulation measures to improve the energy efficiency of low income households.

Since the inception of the Affordable Warmth Scheme in September 2014, over £85m has been invested to improve energy efficiency for more than 19,500 low income households.

Interventions, for those in fuel poverty, available through the Affordable Warmth Scheme will need to be reviewed in the context of supporting a contribution to reducing greenhouse gases and moving to net zero carbon by 2050.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the eligibility criteria applied by the Housing Executive or social housing associations to potential applicants for social housing; and (ii) any planned consultations on, or amendments to, these criteria.

**(AQW 19019/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Full information on eligibility and disqualifications is available at [www.nihe.gov.uk/Housing-Help/Apply-for-a-home/The-Housing-Selection-Scheme](http://www.nihe.gov.uk/Housing-Help/Apply-for-a-home/The-Housing-Selection-Scheme).

I recently published a Consultation Outcome Report on the "Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations". It details the anticipated changes that will update the Housing Selection Scheme.

I have approved two proposals which will make legislative changes to eligibility for applicants involved in unacceptable behaviour. The aim is to enable the Housing Executive to ensure that, prior to the award of a tenancy, it is content that an applicant has not been involved in unacceptable behaviour that would make them ineligible.

The proposed changes will enable a more efficient allocations system with greater tenancy sustainment, providing tools to aid decision-making around eligibility in the light of serious anti-social behaviour.

The Housing Executive has been asked to take forward implementation of the agreed proposals.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities whether she has sufficient resources to bring forward new affordable housing schemes funded by Financial Transactions Capital.

**(AQW 19102/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** I am committed to maximising my Department's use of Financial Transactions Capital (FTC) to increase housing supply and to provide people and families with a greater range of housing options.

My Department approved an allocation of £145 million last year to Co-Ownership for the delivery of 4,000 much needed homes over four years. I announced an additional £13 million allocation [to Co-Ownership] to deliver a further 422 homes in January of this year.

To facilitate the development of new and innovative intermediate housing products, my Department recently published a revised definition of affordable housing. A wider range of products should support housing supply by providing alternatives to shared ownership and more choice to suit differing household needs and circumstances.

Intermediate Rent is one such product in development, aimed at delivering a new supply of affordable, good quality, well-managed homes with longer tenancies. It can provide a better, more affordable rental solution for some, and act as a stepping stone into low-cost home ownership for others.

An Over 55s shared ownership product is also under consideration, which will support those who wish to downsize or move to more suitable homes to do so.

A key part of my ambitious programme to deliver transformative change across housing is the development of a Housing Supply Strategy.

I recently launched a Call for Evidence to inform the development of the draft Strategy. It includes questions about if and how we might better utilise public funding, such as FTC, more effectively to increase housing supply.

**Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for Communities how people make an appointment to obtain a national insurance number.

**(AQW 19106/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** People can contact the National Insurance Number Helpline on 028 71 855407 or 028 71 855406. The Helpline is open from 9.00am-4.00pm Monday to Friday and an appointment will be arranged at the earliest opportunity.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 17956/17-22, how her Department will encourage employers to retain a trainee on completion of their job opportunity.

**(AQW 19134/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Department will be encouraging employers to retain the young person, particularly as they will have invested time and resource to provide them with the necessary skills required.

The Department is also working closely with the Department for Economy to promote the Apprenticeships Scheme as another pathway for employers to continue to retain the young person. Moving across to an apprenticeship opportunity would also allow the young person to further develop their skills as this would lead them to undertake an accredited level of NVQ training.

Should a young person not be kept on by their employer at the end of the JobStart Scheme Departmental Work Coaches will assist with jobsearch

activities to help find a suitable alternative opportunity for the young person through their newly acquired skills.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities how much funding has been allocated to community organisations in Bangor for the Small Pockets of Deprivation programme, for this financial year

**(AQW 19159/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** The Small Pockets of Deprivation (SPOD) funding programme is administered by the Housing Executive on behalf of the Department for Communities. There are two designated SPOD areas within Bangor; Harbour and Rathgill.

In 2021/22, £123,829.05 grant funding will be made available to community residents through programmes and activities coordinated by North Down YMCA and Rathgill Community Association respectively.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities how much has been allocated to community organisations in Bangor for neighbourhood renewal, for this financial year.

**(AQW 19161/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department through the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund has provided financial support of £135,603.37 in the 2021/2022 financial year to three community organisations in the Kilcooley Neighbourhood Renewal area in Bangor.

Neighbourhood Renewal areas do not have individual budgets. Funding is allocated to projects working in the areas.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Communities, given that 40% of mixed doubles curling playing nations are competing at the World Championships in Aberdeen for eight 2022 Winter Olympic spots, how she plans to support curling locally as an age-inclusive, mixed-ability-accessible, non-politicised sport.

**(AQW 19164/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** Sport NI did not receive any requests for support from the sport of curling ahead of the World Championships which took place in Aberdeen between 17th and 23rd May.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities how her Department can help improve sports infrastructure development in Donaghadee.

**(AQW 19217/17-22)**

**Ms Hargey:** My Department recognises that the provision and development of good quality, modern sports infrastructure 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, including in the North Down area. Such engagement explores the need for the provision and development of sporting infrastructure.

Clubs and other organisations who wish to develop their sports facilities should monitor the Sport NI website which provides details of grant programmes that may be suitable for those seeking capital funding. The information on the website is updated regularly.

## Department of Education

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Education pursuant to AQW 17833/17-22, to detail (i) the SAGE evidence quoted for a reduction of transmission COVID-19; and (ii) whether this is within school age population.

**(AQW 18590/17-22)**

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** The advice from the Department of Health (DOH), the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Public Health Agency (PHA) is that wearing face coverings in environments with reduced capacity for social distancing is an effective risk mitigation for the wearer and surrounding pupils. The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) evidence suggests that there is a 7% - 45% reduction in transmission of the COVID-19 virus when wearing face masks. The recommendation has been for post-primary school-age children to wear masks. There has been no requirement for primary school children to wear face masks.

The PHA continues to publish weekly and monthly bulletins on the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland. Information on school COVID-19 incidents is based on situations reported to the PHA COVID School Team. Information on cases associated with schools are provided every week in the bulletin. The information gathered by the PHA schools team, together with information produced by expert groups across the UK and beyond is used to brief Ministers in the NI Executive to inform their decision making on measures to control COVID-19.

**Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Education to detail the progress made to date on the establishment of autism specific learning centres in the Newry Mourne and Down Council area.

**(AQW 18596/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The table below shows the existing Education Authority (EA) autism provision for 88 children and young people in the Newry, Mourne and Down council area in both primary and post primary schools and the status of each. Currently, there is no approved autism provision within post primary schools.

School Name	Type of Provision	Status	Classes	Capacity	Key Stage
Cumran PS	Social & Communication Unit	Approved	2	16	F, 1 & 2
Kilkeel PS	Autism Specific Class	Approved	1	4	F & 1
St Dallans PS, Warrenpoint	Autism Specific Class	Temporary	1	8	1
St Joseph's Convent PS, Newry	Autism Specific Class	Approved	1	8	F & 1
St Joseph's PS, Bessbrook	Autism Specific Class	Approved	2	16	F & 1
St Paul's HS, Bessbrook	Autism Specific Class	Temporary	1	4	3
The High School Ballynahinch	Social & Communication Unit	Temporary	4	32	3 & 4

The EA is currently reviewing pressures across the region including Newry, Mourne and Down Council area, in relation to the placement of children in specialist provision in mainstream and special schools for September 2021. The need for additional specialist provision in this area is recognised and the EA has made contact with primary and post primary schools, to gauge

their interest with a view to establishing or expanding provisions from September 2021, on a temporary basis, based on identified need and availability of accommodation

In addition, the EA intends to provide additional classes for children with autism needs and St Joseph's Convent PS, Newry, will expand provision to include a new specialist provision (learning) class for KS2 pupils from September 2021.

The EA is currently considering responses received to its consultation on Special Educational Needs (SEN) Area Planning Frameworks for Special Schools and Specialist provision in mainstream schools, (October 2020 - closing in April 2021). The outcome of the consultation will determine how specialist provision in mainstream will be established in the future.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) teachers; and (ii) classroom/learning assistants employed in schools in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 18677/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:**

- (i) The number of teachers employed in schools in each of the last five years is given in the table below.

Year	Headcount of teachers	FTE teachers
2015/16	19,835	18,571
2016/17	19,778	18,489
2017/18	19,867	18,490
2018/19	19,762	18,336
2019/20	19,904	18,423

**Source:** Teacher workforce statistics in grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland 2019/20.

**Notes:**

- Figures are based on a reference week in the autumn term.
- Teachers employed at more than one school are counted at the school at which they work the majority of their time.
- Full-time equivalent teacher numbers are based on a 32.4 hour week.

- (ii) The number of classroom assistants employed by the Education Authority and voluntary grammar and grant maintained integrated schools in each of the last five years is given in the table below.

Year	Headcount	FTE
2016/17	10,544	6,609
2017/18	10,969	6,831
2018/19	11,165	6,868
2019/20	11,389	6,940
2020/21	12,561	7,893

**Source:** Education Authority and annual survey of voluntary grammar and grant maintained integrated schools non-teaching staff.

**Notes:**

- Figures are based on a reference week in the autumn term.
- The EA data will capture temporary employees covering substantive post holder as the current system cannot extract this data.
- For EA data, if an employee was recorded on the timesheet for the relevant week, and the hours recorded in that week were not zero, the post and the employee are included in the data.
- For EA data, if an employee was recorded as being absent within the week, they were not included in the data.
- For VG and GMI figures classroom assistants include general, special needs and add. Special needs classroom assistants.
- Headcounts figures mean a part-time classroom assistant will count the same as a full-time classroom assistant.
- For VG and GMI schools classroom assistant headcount may include double counting if someone works in more than one schools.



**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Education what awareness is given to Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder in the curriculum. (AQW 18800/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The curriculum provides schools with considerable flexibility to choose contexts, topics and themes appropriate to their learners, whilst adhering to a framework of statutory minimum requirements. Teachers can provide awareness about Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) within Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) in primary schools and Learning for Life and Work (LLW) in post-primary schools, under the topic of Personal Health.

In PDMU in primary schools, pupils are taught about the importance of rights, responsibilities, making good choices and being aware of the effects of drugs and alcohol on their own health and others. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment's (CCEA) non-statutory guidance also recommends that at the end of Key Stage 2 pupils should learn, in an age-appropriate way, how babies are conceived, grow and born.

In LLW in post-primary schools, pupils explore: the concept of health as the development of a whole person; investigate the influences on physical and emotional / mental personal health, including addiction; and investigate the effects on the body of legal and illegal substances and the risks and consequences of their misuse. In addition, Science and Technology includes requirements within the Science strand for pupils to learn about alcohol use during pregnancy. There are also a number of qualifications at Key Stage 4 and post-16 that explicitly cover issues linked to FASD.

CCEA provides curricular guidance and teaching support materials for use in schools and have produced a range of resources that cover issues linked to FASD. As with all areas of learning within the curriculum, it is a matter for teachers to decide how the curriculum should be delivered, which resources to use, and which specific topics should be covered.

Furthermore, my Department tasked a Working Group to produce a trauma and attachment informed resource booklet 'Putting Care into Education' which includes information on FASD and how this may impact on the child's ability to engage with learning. In January 2019, the booklet was delivered to every school in Northern Ireland with multiple copies for school staff in an attempt to raise awareness of this issue.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education, given the assertion neither he nor his Department have any management responsibility or legal control over school governors, why the Education Authority requires governors to attend their training courses.

(AQW 18899/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Boards of Governors play an important role in supporting schools to ensure that pupils have every opportunity to develop to their full potential within a caring and stimulating learning environment. The Department and the Education Authority have different responsibilities. For instance the Education Authority provides governors with a range of resources and support, including training, to help them become more effective. Training is not mandatory for Governors, however it is expected that they would attend the following:

Training Course	Number / Category of governor required to attend
The Safeguarding Role of the Chairperson and Designated Governor	Chairperson and Designated Governor
Child protection Awareness Training Level 1	All governors
An Introduction to Recruitment and Selection	At least one member of each board of governors who will sit on recruitment panels

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Education what engagement he has had with UNISON on the issue of nutritious free school meals.

(AQW 18913/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The Regional Director of UNISON has written to me recently in relation to the campaign by UNISON calling for universal nutritious free school meals for all children. I have had no other engagement with UNISON to date on this issue.

I have recently agreed to a 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 options and making recommendations for the review of free school meals and uniform grants, the review team will consult widely with relevant stakeholders including UNISON and other trade unions.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Education whether he intend to bring forward legislation on nutritious free school meals during the current Assembly mandate.

(AQW 18914/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Articles 58 and 59 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 require the Education Authority (EA) and Boards of Governors (BoGs) of Voluntary Grammar Schools (VGS) and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools (GMIS) to provide milk, meals and other refreshments in accordance with arrangements approved by the Department. The arrangements approved by the Department outline, among other things, the eligibility criteria for free school meals and the compulsory nutritional

standards for school lunches. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/milk-and-meals-arrangements-education-authority-voluntary-grammar-and-grant-maintained>

The current nutritional standards have been in place since 2007 and require updating to ensure they are in keeping with up to date government guidance on healthy eating. The Department undertook a public consultation on the draft "Update to Nutritional Standards for School Food" from 30 January to 27 March 2020. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/nutritional-standards>

However due to competing priorities as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, this work was paused. Work on the analysis of the responses has recently been restarted and it is hoped to finalise the updated nutritional standards soon to enable their introduction, on a phased basis, from September 2021.

I have recently agreed to a review of free school meals and uniform grant criteria and I will consider any amendment to the current legislation as a result of that review. That review is unlikely to be completed within the current Assembly Mandate.

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Education when face to face SureStart services will resume.  
**(AQW 18939/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Support provided by Sure Start to children and families facing disadvantage has never been so critical as during the COVID pandemic. As a positive first step, the Executive agreed my proposals for resumption of child only Sure Start services which have been in place from 25 March.

It is also important to support Sure Start parents and families who have been impacted by the pandemic, so that they in turn can support the development of their children; the Executive approved my proposals, allowing all remaining Sure Start services to restart from 24 May.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Education whether any foreign companies currently trading in Northern Ireland, under his departmental portfolio, have access to the Investor Court System or the Investor-State Dispute Settlement.  
**(AQW 18994/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** There are no foreign companies currently trading in Northern Ireland which fall within my Departmental portfolio.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) fully funded; and (ii) part-funded nursery places available for the next school term.  
**(AQW 19007/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Pre-school education provision is provided through a mixed model of full-time places (provided for at least 4 hours and 30 minutes on each school day) and part-time places (provided for at least 2 hours 30 minutes and less than 4 hours 30 minutes). All pre-school places are fully funded.

The pre-school admissions process for the 2021-22 academic year is currently underway, so final figures are not yet available. The Education Authority has advised that at the end of stage one of the process, 8367 full-time and 12530 part-time places had been offered, with 627 full-time and 1774 part-time places still available for children not yet in receipt of an offer of a place in a setting of their parents' preference.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education what consideration has he given to the rise in the prevalence of the B.1.617.2 COVID-19 Indian variant in relation to the recommencement of public exams.  
**(AQW 19020/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Decisions in relation to the recommencement of public exams in 2022 will continue to be informed by up-to-date medical, scientific and public health advice from the Department of Health, the Chief Medical Officer, the Assistant Chief Scientific Advisor, the Public Health Agency and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies.

The Department will review any changes to that advice and act on their guidance.

Contingency arrangements for alternative awarding based on centre professional judgement will be in place should they be required.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the Forest Schools initiative.  
**(AQW 19050/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** My department has not conducted a formal assessment of Forest Schools. I am aware that a number of schools use the Forest School initiative. It would however, be the responsibility of individual schools to determine how beneficial or cost effective this initiative is within their own school setting.

I am aware of the benefits of outside play, exploration and supported risk taking and am hopeful that the Summer Scheme being provided this year by schools and the EA's Youth Sector Teams will provide opportunities for similar activities to take place.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education to outline how many kitchen canopy cleaning inspections were carried out in schools in the Belfast area in the last 12 months.

**(AQW 19091/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The 2020/21 canopy inspection programme was not commenced due to the Term Service Contractor (TSC) for the Belfast area ceasing their contract at short notice.

The guidance for the cleaning of kitchen canopies recommends annual inspection as a minimum. However, as meals kitchen locations were closed for the majority of the 2020/21 year, coupled with a fully compliant 2019/20 programme, until a new contract is awarded, any maintenance issues relating to kitchen canopy cleans will be addressed by the Education Authority as they arise.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the future of youth services in Castleberg.

**(AQW 19115/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The EA continues to work with the Principal of Castleberg High School to facilitate the re-opening of the Derg Valley Youth Wing from September 2021.

The school, in partnership with the EA Area Youth Worker, has established a focus group of 13 to 16 year olds to develop plans for the facility and ensure an adequate assessment of need of children and young people in the Castleberg area is completed.

From September 2021 onwards a core youth service programme will be developed, based on the local assessment of need and will consist of youth work programmes, projects and engagement on aspects of health and wellbeing, safety and stability, learning and achieving, good relations, participation, inclusion, diversity and equality of opportunity.

The EA has approved the deployment of a fulltime Youth Support Worker in Charge (YSWinC) to oversee the youth service programme and provide outreach services. Additionally, and to oversee service delivery when the fulltime worker is operating outreach, a part-time YSWinC, supported by two assistant youth support workers has also been approved. This core youth work team will be supported by an Area Youth Worker and a Senior Youth Worker 1, with responsibility for Strabane and the outlying areas (including Castleberg).

Current youth provision in the area includes young people participating in projects such as Minds Matter and Transition projects at the Strabane Resource Centre. A summer programme is also planned that will cater for 5 to 18 year olds and provide fun activities such as Creative Arts and Yogi/Yoga Workshops, 3 educational visits to the Belfast Zoo, Tayto Park and Jungle NI and conclude with a celebration event involving parental engagement as part of a wider fun day. Young people from the focus group will receive training to enable them to volunteer throughout this summer programme.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Education to detail the summer schemes his Department funds in West Tyrone.

**(AQW 19119/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Planning for delivery of the Summer Scheme 2021 is in progress and schools have been given until Friday 28 May to confirm if they wish to proceed in facilitating a scheme this year.

DE officials will analyse the information provided by schools and following that, will confirm budgets prior to schemes starting.

The EA Youth Service also provides a range of summer interventions, including Planned Interventions (summer diversionary activity), T:BUC Camps and, for 2021, a summer youth programme to support young people to re-engage with their peers and provide support in relation to their Covid journey. Applications for these interventions, which have now closed, were open to youth groups across the province, including in West Tyrone.

**Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the roles and responsibilities of the Education Authority Child Protection Support Service; (ii) how parents refer a complaint to the EA CPSS; (iii) the threshold for EA CPSS to refer a complaint to Social Services; and (iv) how many times EA CPSS has referred a parental complaint regards the actions of (a) a school, (b) school staff or (c) a board of governors to social services.

**(AQW 19120/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** I can confirm the following in answer to your questions regarding the Education Authority's (EA) Child Protection Support Service (CPSS).

- (i) The CPSS works regionally with schools, youth provisions and other services within the EA in supporting compliance with safeguarding and child protection responsibilities. Core activities relate to a wide range of functions including provision of advice, support to the EA Board, child protection training, multi-partnership working through operational and strategic groups, participating in Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland sub-groups and the registration, regulation and protection of children involved in entertainment and employment.
- (ii) Information regarding the CPSS is available via the EA website and the following link provides advice on how parents can raise a complaint: <https://www.eani.org.uk/contact/comments-suggestions-and-complaints>

In addition to this, anyone can make contact with the CPSS via their dedicated helpline on 028 95985590.

In terms of the threshold for the CPSS to refer a complaint to Social Services, each case is assessed on its own merit within the defining principles in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and with reference to guidance contained in:

- (iii) 'Co-Operating to Safeguard Children and Young People - Department of Health 2017' and 'DE Circular 2015/13 Dealing with Allegations of Abuse Against a Member of Staff'.
- (iv) Parents are encouraged to contact Social Services directly with any concerns and only in very small number of cases (less than 5), has the CPSS made a referral directly to Social Services.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Education pursuant to AQT 1296/17-22, to detail the processes or actions that would be taken by the Education Authority if a school, without good reason, does not follow their advice, and does not have their decisions or actions endorsed by EA.

**(AQW 19140/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Board of Governors of a school is a body corporate and responsible for making a wide range of decisions affecting the running of the school.

Where the Education Authority is called upon to provide advice to a controlled school on any matter, this is provided pursuant to all relevant procedural and legislative frameworks as appropriate.

It can occur that the Education Authority provides advice on a matter, and the Board of Governors decides to take an alternative course of action.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Education what action his Department has taken to progress the Independent Review of Integrated Education Recommendations 1 and 4.

**(AQW 19145/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** As both recommendations impact on the way an integrated school is defined, I have ensured that both recommendation 1 and recommendation 4 of the Independent Review of Integrated Education will be considered as part of the work of the forthcoming Independent Review of Education.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Education (i) for his assessment of the reasons for NI pupils' consistent out-performance of English and Welsh students at GCSE and A-Levels; (ii) how NI pupils compare with their counterparts in Scotland, taking into account the different qualifications awarded; (iii) how NI pupils compare with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, taking into account the different qualifications awarded; and (iv) for his assessment of the reasons for NI pupils' comparative performance against Scottish and Irish jurisdictions.

**(AQW 19165/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Whilst comparative data for Scotland and the Republic of Ireland is unavailable due to the difference of qualifications involved, Northern Ireland GCSE and A level results compare very favourably by comparison to other jurisdictions offering GCSEs and A levels.

By way of example, information from the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) shows that in 2019 82.2% of GCSE grades awarded to students in Northern Ireland were A\* to C. This was over fifteen percentage points higher than the proportion of A\*-C grades attained by GCSE candidates in England and Wales.

Similarly at A level, in 2019 84.8% of grades awarded to students from Northern Ireland were A\* to C. This was over eight percentage points higher than the proportion of A\*-C grades awarded in the other jurisdictions.

These results reflect the high quality of teaching in Northern Ireland, the knowledge and skills of our learners and the positive attitudes of students towards their learning.

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education when pupils, who are not taking practical assessments for examinations or tuition, will be permitted to sing inside school premises.

**(AQW 19178/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** To reflect the latest public health advice, the Education Authority (EA) recently revised their Music Unlocked guidance for schools to say that one-to-one indoor singing lessons may resume for all pupils. This updated guidance is available on the EA website.

The public health advice and subsequent position that singing indoors in groups is not permitted in schools remains unchanged. My Department will continue to engage with the Department of Health to ensure that all restrictions on singing are lifted as soon as it is safe to do so.

**Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Education when a decision will be made regarding the proposed amalgamation of St Patrick's Grammar School, De La Salle High School and St Mary's High School in Downpatrick.

**(AQW 19194/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The statutory two-month objection period for these Development Proposals (DPs) ended on 29 March 2021. During this period my Department received a significant volume of responses and will require time to assess these alongside all other available pertinent evidence.

Unfortunately I am unable to offer a specific date for a decision, but I am acutely aware of the need for certainty for the interested parties and I will not delay a decision any longer than necessary.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to introduce financial education and planning as part of the post-primary curriculum.

**(AQW 19206/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** Financial Capability is already a statutory element of our curriculum. Schools are required to provide pupils with opportunities to develop a range of skills to promote independence through planning, managing and using resources, across a number of areas of learning.

At post-primary level, pupils should be enabled to develop further their competence as discerning consumers in preparation for independent living. At Key Stage 4, pupils can be taught to understand the implications of credit and debt including overdrafts and different loan arrangements, and ways to compare interest rates, within the area of financial knowledge and understanding. Financial responsibility is also taught which raises awareness and understanding of the wider implications of personal financial decisions.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) offers a number of qualification options that enable young people to develop their Financial Capability skills and use this learning to gain certification. Such qualifications include: GCSE Learning for Life and Work; Level 1 and 2 Preparation for Adult Life; as well as established qualifications in Mathematics and Economics. The CCEA GCSE in Learning for Life and Work includes substantial content on making financial decisions based on a knowledge of personal loans, current accounts and different savings schemes. This also includes learning about the consequences of poor budgeting and the dangers of fraud and identity theft.

Through its Financial Capability microsite, CCEA provides schools with resources and links to case studies and ideas on how to provide opportunities for pupils to engage in activities related to money management, relevant to all Key Stages. As with all areas of learning within the curriculum, it is a matter for teachers to decide how the curriculum should be delivered, which resources to use, and which specific topics should be covered.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education (i) to provide an update on the Sign Language GCSE being tested by Signature in England; (ii) whether testing has completed; and (iii) whether he is committed to adding the Sign Language GCSE as a choice for Northern Ireland students.

**(AQW 19255/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Department for Education (England) is developing content for a potential British Sign Language (BSL) GCSE and proposes to consult on this later this year. As Northern Ireland operates an open qualifications market, if this process leads to accreditation of a qualification by Ofqual, it would then be available for delivery by examination centres in Northern Ireland, once it goes through the standard qualification approval process.

There are several stages to go through before a qualification becomes accredited for use by learners and the GCSE currently being developed is in the early stages. At this point, it is not possible to provide a timescale for when the rollout of this qualification will take place.

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Education, given some families are temporarily rehoused by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in other constituencies due to homelessness, what consideration has he given to provide (i) temporary transport; and (ii) temporary financial assistance to make sure that children are able to get to and home from school.

**(AQW 19272/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** The Home to School Transport policy enables the Education Authority (EA) to consider cases for home to school transport assistance which fall outside of the policy provision where there are exceptional circumstances. Whilst these cases are dealt with by the EA on a case by case basis, the forced relocation of a family may be considered as an exceptional circumstance.

Parents can apply for transport assistance for their children on the grounds of exceptional circumstances using forms which are available on the Education Authority website. The application will then be considered by the EA Exceptional Circumstances panel and if the circumstances are held to be exceptional, transport assistance can be provided on a temporary basis.

**Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the impact on pupils and staff of Saint Conor's College being split across two sites.

**(AQW 19293/17-22)**

**Mr Weir:** I recognise that operating on a split site is far from ideal and that is the reason why the protocols for selecting schools for capital investment include a factor relating to split site operation.

Saint Conor's College was included in my Major Capital Works Programme announcement of 23 June 2020. Work is currently ongoing to procure an Integrated Consultant Team to undertake an initial feasibility study to identify potential options for providing accommodation and outdoor space suitable for a school with an approved enrolment of 730 pupils.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education for an update on his plans to hold a Strategic Insight Lab on childcare.  
(AQW 19307/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The Department is still heavily involved in developing and delivering Covid related support schemes for the childcare sector and this continues to require significant staff time. However, we have begun to scope out the work required to progress the Executive Childcare Strategy, including the Strategic Insight Programme.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education given its implications for recruitment into the Maintained school sector, to detail his plans to abolish the Catholic Certificate in Education.  
(AQW 19391/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** There are currently no active proposals being brought forward in relation to the removal of the Certificate in Religious Education. Employment matters are kept under constant review.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Education whether he intends on collating weekly school data regarding COVID-19 to share with the Committee for Education.  
(AQW 19430/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Management information on pupil and workforce attendance, including COVID-19 absences, is already published each week on the Department of Education website, and is therefore accessible by the Committee for Education, and all other interested parties.

The information is derived from two sources: a weekly survey sent to all grant-aided schools and pre-school education settings to gather information on workforce attendance; and a cumulative weekly report on pupil attendance taken directly from the School Information Management System (SIMS) to avoid any further burden being placed on schools. COVID-19 specific absence codes have been included in SIMS since 4 January 2021.

These publications are available at Management information on attendance of pupils and workforce in schools | Department of Education ([education-ni.gov.uk](http://education-ni.gov.uk)).

## Department of Finance

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Finance what is the budget for the Troubles-related Incident Victims Payment scheme; and whether the budget has received Executive approval.  
(AQW 17208/17-22)

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** The Executive has approved £6.7 million in 2021/22 for administrative costs of the Scheme, demonstrating the Executive's commitment to the delivery of the Scheme.

The Executive Office has also 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.

Ministers will continue to progress financial discussions with the NIO on the basis that it remains their shared view that the Scheme should be funded by the Westminster Government as an addition to the Block Grant and in a manner consistent with the Statement of Funding Policy.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to increase the financial support made available to the Mourne Heritage Trust.  
(AQW 18761/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** I refer the Member to the answer provided in AQW 18765/17-22.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to increase the financial support made available to the National Trust.  
(AQW 18762/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** I refer the Member to the answer provided in AQW 18765/17-22.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Finance to detail his request to the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to establish a cross-departmental task force to address the recent wildfire in the Mournes.  
(AQW 18763/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** I refer the Member to the answer provided in AQW 18765/17-22.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Finance what level of funding will be made available for a restoration project in the Mournes.

**(AQW 18764/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** I refer the Member to the answer provided in AQW 18765/17-22.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Finance for the latest data held by his Department on citizens (i) who list as a first language; or (ii) report fluency in (a) Irish; (b) Polish; (c) Lithuanian; (d) Mandarin or Cantonese; (e) Urdu; and (f) Arabic.

**(AQW 18807/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Statistical information on first language or language fluency is unavailable.

However the 2011 Census included a question on ability in the Irish language. In total 184,898 individuals aged 3 years and over indicated that they had some ability in the Irish language.

The 2011 Census also included a question on main language for individuals aged 3 years and over. In total 17,731 people reported Polish as their main language, 6,250 Lithuanian, 2,214 Chinese (type not specified), 966 Cantonese, 400 Mandarin Chinese, 308 Urdu and 549 Arabic.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Finance whether any foreign companies currently trading in Northern Ireland, under his departmental portfolio, have access to the Investor Court System or the Investor-State Dispute Settlement.

**(AQW 18992/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** My Department has no foreign companies currently trading in the North under its portfolio.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the decision by NIPSA members to reject the pay offer to Civil Service staff.

**(AQW 19022/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The two-year, £44m pay offer made to Civil Service unions and staff is the best possible offer against the very real constraints of a stand-still budget from Westminster. Importantly, the Executive agreed the two-year pay offer which breaks away from the public sector pay freeze imposed for most public servants in England for 2021.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Finance whether officials in his Department, responsible for granting Localised Restrictions Support Scheme funding, liaised with colleagues in the Department for the Economy in respect of individual applications and Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

**(AQW 19084/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** I can confirm that for the administration of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS), my Department has, and continues to, share information under a Data Sharing Agreement with the Department of Economy and Invest NI who administer the Covid Restriction Business Support Scheme (CBRSS) Parts A and B.

The shared information is used to review applications for both schemes to ensure that businesses have received the correct level of support, for the correct period of time, through the correct scheme. Where it was identified that a business had applied for and received payment from both Schemes, LRSS payments were put on hold to prevent double funding.

Where it was determined that a business was entitled to LRSS, applicants have been contacted to inform any payments made under the CBRSS will be offset against the businesses full LRSS entitlement.

Land & Property Services informed businesses which had received financial support under LRSS that they were not eligible for that the monies paid in error would be recovered.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Finance whether any provisions in The Construction Playbook, recently published by the Cabinet Office, apply to Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 19139/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The policy provisions in the Construction Playbook apply to England only as procurement is a devolved matter.

The Procurement Board is currently refreshing extant procurement guidance and will consider best practice initiatives in the Construction Playbook in any revised policy and guidance here.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Finance (i) how many Civil Service staff have availed of counselling under the Employment Assistance Programme, in each of the last five years; (ii) how many counselling sessions staff are entitled to under the EAP as standard; and (iii) what criteria is used to assess whether a staff member is entitled to counselling support beyond the standard number of sessions.

**(AQW 19143/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:**

- I. The number of Civil Service employees who have availed of counselling under the EAP (currently provided by Inspire Workplaces) in each of the last 5 years is detailed in the table below:

Financial Year	No of Clients*	No of Sessions
16/17	481	2294
17/18	575	2912
18/19	651	3811
19/20	747	4007
20/21	421	2176

\* Due to a system replacement statistics for number of clients from Aug 2019 onwards includes all new and returning clients (from previous years). Figures prior to Aug 2019 recorded only new clients.

- II. Civil servants are entitled to a standard maximum of six sessions of counselling in a rolling calendar 12 months.
- III. The criteria to assess whether a staff member is entitled to counselling support beyond the maximum number of six sessions is:
- i. If the Inspire counsellor feels there is clinical justification for the additional sessions and that the client would benefit from additional sessions (this must be agreed during the original six sessions).
  - ii. If Inspire is contacted by the individual who is attending the counselling within four weeks of the completion of the original session requesting additional sessions.

In such cases the counsellor discusses the case with the clinical lead in Inspire who (if they feel justified) will approach the named approver for the Department in question for approval (anonymised request). In all cases the clinical lead in Inspire will advise if there is clinical justification for additional sessions.

Extra session requests are limited to a maximum of an additional three.

If a staff member approaches Inspire but has exceeded the maximum allowed sessions, or is outside the timeframe for consideration of extra sessions, they are signposted to the internal Civil Service Welfare Support Service to help them consider alternative options.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance pursuant to AQW 17167/17-22, when the transfer of staff will be completed.  
(AQW 19170/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** NICSHR is currently working to transition agency staff from the 2016 agency worker framework to the new Contracts which were awarded in January 2021 to CPL, Staffline and Premiere People.

The majority of transitions (approximately 2,000 agency staff) are expected to be completed by July 2021. There is a small number of agency staff (approximately 100) on the 2016 framework with assignment end dates post July 2021. These agency workers will be transitioned at their assignment end date.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 18794/17-22, whether he intends to instruct Land and Property Services to carry out an analysis of the overpayments to determine the number caused by (i) applicant error; and (ii) administration error.

(AQW 19208/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** I have no plans to instruct Land & Property Services (LPS) to carry out such an analysis of the reasons for overpayment under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS).

Significant time and resources have been spent in reviewing applications to ensure that they were paid in accordance with the Scheme Regulations, as recommended by the Northern Ireland Audit Office. To date the LRSS has paid out over £314m to over 15,300 businesses. 654 applicants have been identified as being overpaid or having received LRSS payments they are not eligible for. The amount involved in these cases is £5.22m, which is less than 1.7% of all payments made under the scheme to date.

To undertake an in-depth analysis of each of the 654 applications to determine if the overpayment was as result of applicant error or administrative error, or indeed due to the complexity of the scheme as a result of the frequently changing health regulations, would not be an effective use of LPS time and resources. Directing resources to such an in-depth analysis would have a negative effect on LPS' ability to administer ongoing business support schemes and deliver its normal functions.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of deaths in each of the last five years where the cause of death was recorded as an Eating Disorder, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 19250/17-22)



**Mr Murphy:** The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) collates data on death registrations.

The table provides the number of deaths where the underlying cause was an eating disorder (ICD10 F50) for the last 5 years.

Number of deaths Where the Underlying Cause was an Eating Disorder by Year and Assembly Area

Assembly Area	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 <sup>P</sup>
Belfast East	0	0	0	0	1
Belfast North	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast South	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast West	0	0	0	0	2
East Antrim	0	0	0	0	0
East Londonderry	0	0	1	0	0
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	0	0	0	0	0
Foyle	0	0	0	0	0
Lagan Valley	1		0	0	0
Mid Ulster	0	0	0	0	0
Newry And Armagh	0	0	0	0	0
North Antrim	0	0	0	0	0
North Down	0	0	0	0	0
South Antrim	0	0	0	0	0
South Down	0	0	0	0	0
Strangford	0	0	0	1	0
Upper Bann	0	0	0	0	0
West Tyrone	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>

P Data in 2020 are provisional

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance why eligibility for the Manufacturing (Industrial Derating) Support Grant was changed to exclude those who had received the Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant subsequent to the opening of scheme applications on 10 May 2021.

**(AQW 19302/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** The criteria for the Manufacturing (Industrial Derating) Support Grant have not changed. The scheme was agreed by the Executive to provide assistance for industrial businesses in premises with a total Net Annual Value between £15001 and £51000 which were unable to access grant funding during 2020. I made this explicit in my statement to the Assembly on 15 March.

When the guidance for the Manufacturing (Industrial Derating) Support Grant was being written, it was not anticipated that a business operating from premises that benefit from industrial de-rating would have qualified for the £25,000 Retail Hospitality Tourism and Leisure Grant last year, given the nature of the businesses that were supported by that scheme. It was only when the list of payees for the grant was being prepared that my Department became aware of the overlap between the two schemes and the guidance was then updated accordingly. This was a case where it became necessary for the department to clarify the rules of the scheme in the light of the experience of implementing the scheme. However, the eligibility criteria or principles of the scheme did not change, which are to support a class of business that had been excluded from the previous support schemes.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Finance how many economic appraisals he has requested from The Executive Office following bids for funding, since October 2019.

**(AQW 19336/17-22)**

**Mr Murphy:** Since the beginning of October 2019, some 23 economic appraisals have been submitted to my Department by TEO. It is the responsibility of a department to seek the necessary approvals for expenditure. Therefore none of these economic appraisals were directly requested by DoF.

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Finance when he will answer AQW 17355/17-22.  
(AQW 19557/17-22)

**Mr Murphy:** AQW 17355/17-22 was answered on 20 April 2021 and a copy of that answer is supplied below.

Work is underway to develop proposals for a new Civil Service Management Trainee Scheme (similar to the GB 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 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.

## Department of Health

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health what measures he is considering to reduce the impact of a potential second wave of COVID-19 on low income and deprived communities.  
(AQW 5724/17-22)

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I am aware of the inequality issues identified during the COVID-19 pandemic and emerging evidence of the disparities in outcomes for those diagnosed with COVID-19 across a range of groups. It is vital that the Health and Social Care system and other government departments continue to work closely together to reduce the risk and the impact of COVID-19 on low income and deprived communities. This approach is at the heart of Making Life Better, which is the Executive's overarching strategic framework to improve health and address health inequalities. My Department, with the Public Health Agency and other Government Departments will continue to work collaboratively to look at the factors that impact on health and wellbeing in Northern Ireland.

The Public Health Agency Health Improvement Division is currently implementing a Health Improvement Recovery Plan. This ensures that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, health and social wellbeing improvement services, such as drugs and alcohol, mental health and wellbeing and family support, are sustained and repurposed, when relevant, for those in need and those who are most vulnerable. It also aims to be assured of the safety and quality of services provided throughout Northern Ireland.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Department for Communities has also adopted a cross-sectoral partnership approach to ensure support is in place for the most vulnerable. This complements the range of existing programmes that the Department has in place to support individuals and communities in need.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health for an assessment of how his request that people stay at home is consistent with the maintenance of private tests, which have already been postponed, occurring in school halls on weekend mornings.  
(AQW 12445/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** Currently any person responsible for organising or operating a gathering of over 15 must:

- a) have carried out a risk assessment which meets the requirements of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, whether or not that person is subject to those Regulations;
- b) take all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of the coronavirus, including implementing the preventive and protective measures identified in the risk assessment and comply with any relevant guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Government Department.
- c) A person responsible for organising a gathering must, if requested to do so by a relevant person, provide a copy of the risk assessment and an account of the reasonable measures taken.

For specific guidance on schools I would refer you to my colleague, the Minister of Education.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider introducing rapid COVID-19 testing for special schools.  
(AQW 13102/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** A programme of regular testing for all staff and children in special schools commenced at the beginning of March 2021. The testing programme in special schools uses a new testing technology called LAMP (loop-mediated isothermal amplification) which utilises a less invasive saliva based testing process.

Test kits have been issued to all 39 special schools.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail the rationale of imposing an 11:00pm curfew on hot food delivery services. (AQW 14252/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** When the restrictions were reintroduced from 26 December 2020, restaurant takeaways and deliveries were not permitted as a necessary and proportionate response to the pandemic by limiting the hours that businesses were allowed to operate.

All relaxations were to be introduced gradually to minimise the risk to public health and, if necessary, could be quickly reversed.

On 15 April 2021 the Executive agreed a range of relaxations which came into effect on 30 April, including the ending of the curfew on restaurant and takeaway food deliveries. As with other businesses, they were subject to the requirement to operate safely and to follow health and safety law and guidance and to take measures to keep staff and customers safe.

The Executive, when making decisions on restrictions, takes into account the scientific and medical evidence and also the impacts of the restrictions on the economy and society. The Executive weighs up the totality of the effect each restriction can have in combination with other restrictions in reducing the rate of infections of COVID-19.

It is not always possible to disaggregate the precise impact on the rate of transmission of the virus in the community for each of the individual restrictions on their own. It is not always possible to disaggregate the precise impact on the rate of transmission of the virus in the community for each of the individual restrictions on their own.

Scientific evidence used by the Executive for decision making purposes is now publically available: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

On 2 March 2021 the Executive 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions'. The pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

In this new process, the management of the changes to the restrictions regulations moved to the Executive Office (TEO).

TEO will now hold the lead responsibility and operational management of the process leading to Executive decisions on the ongoing need for restrictions and the requirement to amend the regulations.

This responsibility includes receiving and managing all proposals from Executive departments, management of the decision making process and facilitating consultation with departments on the drafting of amendment regulations. This work is supported by a Cross-Departmental Working Group, chaired by the Director of the TEO COVID-19 Taskforce team with membership from all 9 Departments and key stakeholders, including local government and PSNI.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail the scientific rationale behind limiting the delivery of hot food to 11:00pm, as per the current regulations.

(AQW 15039/17-22)

**Mr Swann:** When the restrictions were reintroduced from 26 December 2020, restaurant takeaways and deliveries were not permitted as a necessary and proportionate response to the pandemic by limiting the hours that businesses were allowed to operate.

All relaxations were to be introduced gradually to minimise the risk to public health and, if necessary, could be quickly reversed.

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**Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Health what the estimated R rate of opening up gyms with appropriate personal protective equipment and restrictions would be.

**(AQW 15071/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** As you will be aware, on 15 April the Executive decided that gyms could reopen for individual activities from 23 April. It also gave an indicative date of 24 May for group activities to return in gyms. This was ratified by the Executive on 20 May.

The Executive, when making decisions on restrictions, takes into account the scientific and medical evidence and also the impacts of the restrictions on the economy and society. The Executive weighs up the totality of the effect each restriction can have in combination with other restrictions in reducing the rate of infections of COVID-19.

It is not always possible to disaggregate the precise impact on the rate of transmission of the virus in the community for each of the individual restrictions on their own.

Scientific evidence used by the Executive for decision making purposes is now publically available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

**Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health what medical and scientific evidence there is to prevent (i) essential homeware shops that sell items such as bedding and kitchenware; and (ii) office supply businesses that supply ink, stationery and photocopying services to the public, operating as click and collect.

**(AQW 15188/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** When the restrictions were reintroduced from 26 December 2020, click and collect for non-essential retail was not permitted. The Department for the Economy worked with the sector on how non-essential retail could reopen. All relaxations were to be introduced gradually to minimise the risk to public health and, if necessary, could be quickly reversed. On 2 March 2021 the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions.

On 1 April 2021 the Executive agreed a range of relaxations which came into effect on 12 April including click-and-collect services for all retailers. On 15 April 2021 the Executive agreed that from 30 April all retail businesses were permitted to reopen.

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Scientific evidence used by the Executive for decision making purposes is now publically available: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 8938/17-22, in what format the Public Health Agency collects information it shares with its equivalents in the south of Ireland for contact tracing purposes.

**(AQW 15266/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Public Health Agency (PHA) has advised that contact tracing information is collected electronically in Excel spreadsheet format.

The electronic information collected for COVID-19 positive cases and close contacts includes name; contact details, demographic details; date of symptom onset; date of testing and travel related information.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to detail the funding awarded to the Health and Social Care Research and Development division for each financial year since 2011/12.

**(AQW 15344/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Details of funding awarded to the Health and Social Care Research and Development division for each financial year since 2011/12 is set out in the table below.

Financial Year	Allocated funding DoH (£m)
2011-12	10.19
2012-13	10.38

Financial Year	Allocated funding DoH (£m)
2013-14	10.34
2014-15	11.17
2015-16	11.17
2016-17	12.23
2017-18	11.88
2018-19	11.68
2019-20	12.80

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) whether GPs are paid to meet virtually at GP partnerships with Health and Social Care Trusts; (ii) the rationale for this decision; and (iii) the rate of payment.

**(AQW 15835/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** An attendance allowance is available for independent contractors – such as GPs – for statutory meetings or when attendance of professionals is essential to the development or implementation of a policy. Independent contractors may also claim an allowance for locum expenses or financial loss up to a maximum rate.

As set out above, the rationale for this is to cover attendance and financial loss/ locum expenses. The standard rate of payment for 20/21 is set out in circular HSC (F) 06-2020 which details an attendance allowance of £260 per day or £130 for meetings up to 4 hours long. As per the circular, unpaid members of committees may be paid a financial loss allowance to reimburse actual certified loss of earnings resulting from attendance at meetings; alternatively unpaid members of committees may be paid a deputising (locum) allowance to reimburse the full cost of employing a person to provide cover or substitution to enable attendance. Claims must be accompanied by documentary evidence. Rates payable in this regard is up to a maximum rate per day of £400 or £200 per half day.

Some flexibility in terms of the rate of payment may be offered in relation to specific projects where the nature of the work demands a high degree of ongoing input from GPs.

Overall, the purpose of payments is to secure the knowledge, expertise and participation of GPs as independent contractors as key leaders in achieving the successful development and implementation of reform of our health and social care system.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health what mechanisms are in place to quality assure calls made by COVID-19 clinical contact tracers.

**(AQW 16009/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Public Health Agency has advised that the Contact Tracing Service has a call coaching system to assure and improve the quality of calls delivered. As part of a wider programme of quality assurance and training, a sample of calls are monitored “live” with learning used to inform quality review discussions with tracers and personal development plans as required.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health to detail his Covid Recovery Plan for GP services.

**(AQW 16682/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** GP practices are open and are providing face to face appointments for patients who are assessed as requiring them.

Recently collected figures indicate that in that particular week there were 164,137 GP and Practice Nurse consultations. That is a rate of 82 per 1,000 patients. Almost 40% of these were face to face.

For comparison, information collected in November 2019 shows a consultation rate of 86.8 per 1,000, of which 50% were face to face. The 2019 face to face activity would have included activities such as screening, which are now gradually being reintroduced.

General Practice has changed the way it works in responding to the current pandemic and despite the demands and capacity limits that COVID has created, GPs have maintained all of the core elements of general practice services.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has meant the introduction of innovative ways of working.

GP practices are operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients to continue to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required. Technologies such as video conferencing and enabling patients to send photographs by text have helped to facilitate diagnosis and ensure that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential.

I recognise that face to face appointments are valued by many people as the norm for GP delivered care and that patients have at times found it difficult to access GP services via telephone. However, the model of primary care in place prior to the pandemic was already under considerable pressure and was not sustainable without significant change.

The scale of demand for GP led services has continuously grown over recent years. Figures collected in November 2019 indicate that total contacts with general practice stood at almost 15 million per year. For comparison, in 2014 the estimated total number of contacts was 12.7 million.

The need for transformation in primary care was already clear and initiatives such as the Multi-Disciplinary Team Programme; investment in technology, including telephony; the introduction of Advanced Nurse Practitioners and additional General Practice Nurses were making a difference to how services are delivered in primary care.

The use of more innovative ways of working, including telephone triage and telephone and video consultations, is now widely embedded within the primary care sector. As we emerge from COVID, it will be necessary to complement traditional ways of working by building upon new approaches, including the use of digital innovation and skills mix, to help ensure the sustainability of GP services in the face of increasing pressures and demands.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Health why in-person hospital and dental appointments can be made but GP appointments cannot; and what guidance his Department has provided to GPs in respect of in-person appointments.  
**(AQW 16772/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** GP practices are open and are providing face to face appointments for patients who are assessed as requiring them.

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The use of more innovative ways of working, including telephone triage and telephone and video consultations, is now widely embedded within the primary care sector. As we emerge from COVID, it will be necessary to complement traditional ways of working by building upon new approaches, including the use of digital innovation and skills mix, to help ensure the sustainability of GP services in the face of increasing pressures and demands.

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Health, in light of the recent blood clot announcements in the UK over the AstraZenica vaccine, what is being done to ascertain its impact on those in receipt of this vaccine who have (i) a medical history; and (ii) been diagnosed at risk of stroke or any type of thrombosis.  
**(AQW 17034/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Reports of any suspected adverse drug reactions (ADRs) are made directly to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) via the Yellow Card scheme.

The Yellow Card scheme is the UK system for collecting and monitoring information on suspected safety concerns or incidents involving medicines and medical devices. MHRA will consider all the information received and decide if the vaccine requires further investigation.

The purpose of the scheme is to provide an early warning that the safety of a product may require further investigation and relies on voluntary reporting of suspected ADRs by health professionals and members of the public (patients, users, or carers).

In addition to this each Trust has a clinical incident reporting system where staff report any incident involving a medicine. Arrangements are in place to ensure there is a regional approach taken on the reporting of all suspected adverse reactions which might be connected to the Covid-19 Vaccines. These reports are shared with Departmental officials who will continue to monitor the situation.

Further information about the Yellow Card scheme, including its contribution to identifying safety issues can be found on the Yellow Card website (<https://yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk/the-yellow-card-scheme/>).

The Member will be aware of the updated advice from JCVI that all persons aged under 40 should be offered an alternative to the AstraZeneca vaccine wherever possible.

The MHRA advice is that anyone who experienced cerebral or other major blood clots occurring with low levels of platelets after their first vaccine dose of COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca should not have their second dose of that vaccine.

The vast majority of cases of these rare blood clots have occurred after the first dose of vaccine. The JCVI advise that those who have had a first AZ dose without incident should take up the offer of the 2nd dose, which is very important for full protection. JCVI and MHRA will continue to keep the data under review.

All persons over 40 who remain unvaccinated, will now primarily receive the vaccine at a community pharmacy or by their GP, who both exclusively use the AstraZeneca vaccine. As such, the vaccines are administered by health care professionals who will be aware of the contraindications around administration of the AstraZeneca vaccine and will not administer this vaccine where an alternative is considered more suitable.

Everybody who has already had a first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine should receive a second dose, irrespective of age, except for the very small number of people who experienced blood clots with low platelet counts following their first vaccination.

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Health in light of the recent blood clot announcements in the UK over the AstraZeneca vaccine, what advice will be issued to those who have received this vaccine and have a medical history of stroke or any type of thrombosis.

**(AQW 17035/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Reports of any suspected adverse drug reactions (ADRs) are made directly to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) via the Yellow Card scheme.

The Yellow Card scheme is the UK system for collecting and monitoring information on suspected safety concerns or incidents involving medicines and medical devices. MHRA will consider all the information received and decide if the vaccine requires further investigation.

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Everybody who has already had a first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine should receive a second dose, irrespective of age, except for the very small number of people who experienced blood clots with low platelet counts following their first vaccination.

**Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Health, in light of the recent blood clot announcements in the UK over the AstraZenica vaccine, what action will be taken with regard to vaccination for those who have (i) a medical history; and (ii) been diagnosed as at risk of stroke or any type of thrombosis.

**(AQW 17036/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Reports of any suspected adverse drug reactions (ADRs) are made directly to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) via the Yellow Card scheme.

The Yellow Card scheme is the UK system for collecting and monitoring information on suspected safety concerns or incidents involving medicines and medical devices. MHRA will consider all the information received and decide if the vaccine requires further investigation.

The purpose of the scheme is to provide an early warning that the safety of a product may require further investigation and relies on voluntary reporting of suspected ADRs by health professionals and members of the public (patients, users, or carers).

In addition to this each Trust has a clinical incident reporting system where staff report any incident involving a medicine. Arrangements are in place to ensure there is a regional approach taken on the reporting of all suspected adverse reactions which might be connected to the Covid-19 Vaccines. These reports are shared with Departmental officials who will continue to monitor the situation.

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Everybody who has already had a first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine should receive a second dose, irrespective of age, except for the very small number of people who experienced blood clots with low platelet counts following their first vaccination.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail the COVID regulations relating to booking and using domestic holiday homes and other tourist accommodation.

**(AQW 17098/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** As of 24th May 2021, all remaining travel and tourism facilities are permitted to open. This decision was ratified by the Executive on 20th May.

Up to six people from two households can stay together overnight. If a household has six or more members the number staying together can be greater than six, as long as it is not more than 10. Children aged 12 years and under are not counted in the total in both cases.

Accommodation providers will be required to collect customer details to help with the Test, Trace, Protect contact tracing programme (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-testing-and-contact-tracing>). Additionally, those providers which sell or provide food or drink for consumption on the premises must have carried out a risk assessment and take all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of COVID-19.

Further information relating to travel and tourism, as well as the restrictions generally, is available at NI Direct on the link below:

Coronavirus (COVID-19) regulations guidance: what the restrictions mean for you | nidirect (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>)

On 2 March 2021 the Executive 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions'. The pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

In this new process, the management of the changes to the restrictions regulations moved to the Executive Office (TEO).

TEO will now hold the lead responsibility and operational management of the process leading to Executive decisions on the ongoing need for restrictions and the requirement to amend the regulations.



This responsibility includes receiving and managing all proposals from Executive departments, management of the decision making process and facilitating consultation with departments on the drafting of amendment regulations. This work is supported by a Cross-Departmental Working Group, chaired by the Director of the TEO COVID-19 Taskforce team with membership from all 9 Departments and key stakeholders, including local government and PSNI.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health what plans are being put in place to address post-pandemic increased mental health needs forecast by health professionals.

**(AQW 17125/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The implementation of the Mental Health Action Plan and the new Mental Health Strategy are key elements of responding to the post-pandemic mental health needs of the population.

The new Strategy will set the strategic direction for mental health services for the next decade, and will take full account of the new context and demand created by the pandemic.

**Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the guidelines provided to GPs on providing face-to-face appointments.

**(AQW 17289/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** GP practices are open and are providing face to face appointments for patients who are assessed as requiring them.

Recently collected figures indicate that in that particular week there were 164,137 GP and Practice Nurse consultations. That is a rate of 82 per 1,000 patients. Almost 40% of these were face to face.

For comparison, information collected in November 2019 shows a consultation rate of 86.8 per 1,000, of which 50% were face to face. The 2019 face to face activity would have included activities such as screening, which are now gradually being reintroduced.

General Practice has changed the way it works in responding to the current pandemic and despite the demands and capacity limits that COVID has created, GPs have maintained all of the core elements of general practice services.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has meant the introduction of innovative ways of working.

GP practices are operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients to continue to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required. Technologies such as video conferencing and enabling patients to send photographs by text have helped to facilitate diagnosis and ensure that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential.

I recognise that face to face appointments are valued by many people as the norm for GP delivered care and that patients have at times found it difficult to access GP services via telephone. However, the model of primary care in place prior to the pandemic was already under considerable pressure and was not sustainable without significant change.

The scale of demand for GP led services has continuously grown over recent years. Figures collected in November 2019 indicate that total contacts with general practice stood at almost 15 million per year. For comparison, in 2014 the estimated total number of contacts was 12.7 million.

The need for transformation in primary care was already clear and initiatives such as the Multi-Disciplinary Team Programme; investment in technology, including telephony; the introduction of Advanced Nurse Practitioners and additional General Practice Nurses were making a difference to how services are delivered in primary care.

The use of more innovative ways of working, including telephone triage and telephone and video consultations, is now widely embedded within the primary care sector. As we emerge from COVID, it will be necessary to complement traditional ways of working by building upon new approaches, including the use of digital innovation and skills mix, to help ensure the sustainability of GP services in the face of increasing pressures and demands.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health how many people who have been called for COVID-19 vaccination have yet to take up the offer, broken down by age group.

**(AQW 17529/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The member will be aware that most people book their own appointments only those in groups being vaccinated by GP are actually contacted.

The department does not record who have not booked for vaccinations but rather those who have attended. Figures below show the percentages of people vaccinated within each cohort.

- >80 years old: 100%, 82,396 first dose and 74,911 second dose,
- 70-79 years old: 96.47%, 138,211 first dose and 131,269 second dose.
- 60-69 years old: 98.66%, 193,061 first dose and 146,966 second dose.
- 50-59 years old: 86.92%, 223,067 first dose and 97,794 second dose.

- 40-49 years old: 75.57%, 182,911 first dose and 61,656 second dose
- 30-39 years old: 53.91%, 135,505 first dose, 43,609 second dose.
- 18-29 years old: 19.34%, 54,983 first dose, 35,020 second dose.

The member will be aware that an individual may have eligibility outside their age cohort by virtue of occupation, carer or clinical status.

Updated daily data can be found: <https://covid-19.hscni.net/ni-covid-19-vaccinations-dashboard/>

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health what joined up approach between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is being taken to travel within the UK to ensure consistency.

**(AQW 17538/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Travel outside of NI is vital to connecting families, boosting businesses and underpinning the economy. The Executive also appreciate how much families are looking forward to their holidays when it is safe to do so.

It is absolutely essential that any steps we take now lay the groundwork for a sustainable return to travel that is able to weather the challenges we continue to face, despite the success of our vaccine programme, which have been brought home to us so clearly by recent surges in infections in many other countries.

From 24 May, people will not be asked to self-isolate when they return to Northern Ireland if they have visited family or friends in other parts of the CTA. In addition, from 24 May, travellers who have come to Northern Ireland but have completed mandatory quarantine on arrival at a point of entry elsewhere in the CTA will also not have to self-isolate. Those exempt from self-isolation will be asked to take lateral flow device tests for COVID-19 pre-departure, as well as on days two and eight post-arrival into Northern Ireland.

On 20 May the Executive agreed to the following list of countries being included on the international travel 'green list' from next week, without the need for people to quarantine on their return to Northern Ireland. The countries and territories are: Australia, Iceland, New Zealand, Faroe Islands, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Gibraltar, Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, Brunei, Falkland Islands, Portugal, Israel, and Singapore.

People arriving from these destinations will be required to undertake a pre-departure test and to complete a UK passenger locator form together with a day 2 test. Those returning from Portugal, Israel or Singapore will be asked to take an additional Day 8 PCR test, and information will be available on how they can obtain this free of charge. This will be kept under review.

**Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Health when Coronavirus regulations will be amended to allow partners to attend hospital and medical appointments.

**(AQW 17645/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My officials recently completed a review of the guidance for all healthcare settings. New guidance for visiting in hospices and hospitals was issued on 30 April 2021, effective from 7 May 2021, and represents a significant easing in the restrictions formerly in place.

In the main, where someone is attending a hospital for an appointment, one person only may be facilitated to accompany them where social distancing and other Infection Prevention and Control measures can be ensured.

Where someone has been admitted to a general hospital, one daily visit from one of two nominated individuals (from up to two households) can be permitted, with the timing/ duration agreed with the person in charge.

In respect of maternity, a chosen birth partner will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to any pregnancy related appointments or ultrasound scans, and to accompany the pregnant woman for induction of labour, duration of labour and birth and, for up to three hours after the birth.

Where the woman is receiving inpatient care, one daily visit from one of two nominated individuals (from up to two households) can be permitted.

Full implementation of the new guidance will be subject to dynamic risk assessment, but all five local Health & Social Care Trusts have undertaken to work to ensure measures are put in place to facilitate this as soon as possible.

The full guidance (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>) sets out the detailed guidance for each category of care.

**Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Health when travel restrictions will be eased for travel to other areas of the UK for purposes other than employment.

**(AQW 17647/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** From Monday 24 May, travel within the Common Travel Area will no longer require an essential reason. Until that time only essential travel should occur within the Common Travel Area.

From 24 May, people will not be asked to self-isolate when they return to Northern Ireland if they have visited family or friends in other parts of the CTA. In addition, from 24 May, travellers who have come to Northern Ireland but have completed managed isolation on arrival at a point of entry elsewhere in the CTA will also not have to self-isolate. Those exempt from

self-isolation will be asked to take lateral flow device tests for COVID-19 pre-departure, as well as on days two and eight post-arrival into Northern Ireland.

Further guidance, as well as regular updates on travel is available on the NI Direct website, as linked below.

Coronavirus (COVID-19): travel within the Common Travel Area | nidirect (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-travel-within-common-travel-area>)

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health whether foreign holidays will resume this year.

**(AQW 17668/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Travel outside of NI is vital to connecting families, boosting businesses and underpinning the economy. The Executive also appreciate how much families are looking forward to their holidays when it is safe to do so. We also understand how important business and holiday travel is for airports and airlines, alongside the important transit of goods, which has been more essential than ever during the pandemic.

It is absolutely essential that any steps we take now lay the groundwork for a sustainable return to travel that is able to weather the challenges we continue to face, despite the success of our vaccine programme, which have been brought home to us so clearly by recent surges in infections and increasing prevalence of variants of concern in many other countries.

On 20 May the Executive agreed to the following list of countries being included on the green list from 24 May, without the need for people to quarantine on their return to Northern Ireland. The countries and territories are: Australia, Iceland, New Zealand, Faroe Islands, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Gibraltar, Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, Brunei, Falkland Islands, Portugal, Israel, and Singapore.

People arriving from these destinations are required to undertake a pre-departure test and to complete a UK passenger locator form together with a mandatory day 2 test.

In addition, those arriving from Portugal, Israel or Singapore will be required to take a voluntary Day 8 PCR test, which will be provided free of charge. This will be kept under review.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Health when hospital visiting hours for partners of women in labour or who have given birth will be extended.

**(AQW 17730/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My officials recently completed a review of the guidance for all healthcare settings. New guidance for visiting in hospices and hospitals was issued on 30 April 2021, effective from 7 May 2021, and represents a significant easement in the restrictions formerly in place.

In respect of maternity, a chosen birth partner will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to any pregnancy related appointments or ultrasound scans, and to accompany the pregnant woman for induction of labour, duration of labour and birth and, for up to three hours after the birth.

Where the woman is receiving inpatient care, one daily visit from one of two nominated individuals (from up to two households) can be permitted.

Full implementation of the new guidance will be subject to a dynamic risk assessment, but all five local Health & Social Care Trusts have undertaken to work to ensure measures are put in place to facilitate this as soon as possible.

The full guidance (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>) sets out the detailed guidance for each category of care.

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Health what discussions he has had regarding 10-day quarantine for travel within the Common Travel Area.

**(AQW 17765/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** From Monday 24 May, travel within the Common Travel Area will be no longer require an essential reason. Until that time only essential travel should occur within the Common Travel Area.

From 24 May, people will not be asked to self-isolate when they return to Northern Ireland if they have visited family or friends in other parts of the CTA. In addition, from 24 May, travellers who have come to Northern Ireland but have completed managed isolation on arrival at a point of entry elsewhere in the CTA will also not have to self-isolate. Those exempt from self-isolation will be asked to take lateral flow device tests for COVID-19 pre-departure, as well as on days two and eight post-arrival into Northern Ireland.

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**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health to detail the Sure Start Capital Projects, and their location, that his Department are planning or expect to fund during the (i) 2021/22; (ii) 2022/23; and (iii) 2023/24 financial years.

**(AQW 17846/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department of Education has guaranteed the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) £177k in 2021/22 to enable the completion of Sure Start capital works projects at:

- Abbey Sure Start, Newtownabbey;
- Shankill Sure Start, Belfast; and
- Ards Surestart, Kircubbin.

I am not in a position to guarantee funding beyond the current financial year.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health for an update as to when his Department will be recommending GP surgeries services can return to business as usual.

**(AQW 18176/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** GP practices are open and are providing face to face appointments for patients who are assessed as requiring them.

Recently collected figures indicate that in that particular week there were 164,137 GP and Practice Nurse consultations. That is a rate of 82 per 1,000 patients. Almost 40% of these were face to face.

For comparison, information collected in November 2019 shows a consultation rate of 86.8 per 1,000, of which 50% were face to face. The 2019 face to face activity would have included activities such as screening, which are now gradually being reintroduced.

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I recognise that face to face appointments are valued by many people as the norm for GP delivered care and that patients have at times found it difficult to access GP services via telephone. However, the model of primary care in place prior to the pandemic was already under considerable pressure and was not sustainable without significant change.

The scale of demand for GP led services has continuously grown over recent years. Figures collected in November 2019 indicate that total contacts with general practice stood at almost 15 million per year. For comparison, in 2014 the estimated total number of contacts was 12.7 million.

The need for transformation in primary care was already clear and initiatives such as the Multi-Disciplinary Team Programme; investment in technology, including telephony; the introduction of Advanced Nurse Practitioners and additional General Practice Nurses were making a difference to how services are delivered in primary care.

The use of more innovative ways of working, including telephone triage and telephone and video consultations, is now widely embedded within the primary care sector. As we emerge from COVID, it will be necessary to complement traditional ways of working by building upon new approaches, including the use of digital innovation and skills mix, to help ensure the sustainability of GP services in the face of increasing pressures and demands.

**Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Health, in the context of the improved public health situation, whether he will review the visiting guidance for Health and Social Care facilities and services, including (i) maternity services; and (ii) care homes; (iii) general hospital wards; and (iv) long-term care facilities.

**(AQW 18304/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My officials recently completed a review of the guidance for all healthcare settings, including maternity services, general hospitals and care homes. The new guidance was issued on 30 April 2021, effective from 7 May 2021.

The full guidance (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>) sets out the detailed guidance for each category of care.

In respect of other long-term care facilities, my Department intends publishing updated guidance shortly.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Health whether he will review urgently the current restrictions on (i) hospital visiting; and (ii) partners attending maternity appointments and births.

**(AQW 18353/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My officials recently completed a review of the guidance for all healthcare settings. New guidance for visiting in hospices and hospitals was issued on 30 April 2021, effective from 7 May 2021, and represents a significant easement in the restrictions formerly in place.

In general hospitals, one daily visit from one of two nominated individuals (from up to two households) can be permitted, with the timing/ duration agreed with the person in charge.

In respect of maternity, a chosen birth partner will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to any pregnancy related appointments or ultrasound scans, and to accompany the pregnant woman for induction of labour, duration of labour and birth and, for up to three hours after the birth.

Where the woman is receiving inpatient care, one daily visit from one of two nominated individuals (from up to two households) can be permitted.

The full guidance (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>) sets out the detailed guidance for each category of care.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health what work his Department has undertaken on the connection between homelessness, housing stress and poor mental health.

**(AQW 18385/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** I recognise that homelessness is a multi-faceted issue that presents significant challenges to many individuals, including contributing to poor mental health.

In recognition of this, my department works collaboratively with the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), which have statutory responsibility for homelessness and the delivery of the Inter Departmental Homelessness Action Plan (IDHAP).

The IDHAP was co-produced by Government Departments, statutory partners, homelessness service providers and service users, and was developed to complement the NIHE's Homelessness Strategy by focussing on addressing gaps in non-accommodation services. A number of actions have been attributed to my Department.

The progress report on the Year Two IDHAP, including health related actions, was published on 17 May on both my Department's and the Department for Communities websites.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health how many GP practices operate without being commissioned for services.

**(AQW 18439/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The standard model for GP provision in Northern Ireland is via GPs operating as independent contractors. These GPs contract with the Health and Social Care Board, via the General Medical Services (GMS) contract, to provide primary medical services to their patients. The number of GP practices can be found in the Quarterly General Medical Services Statistics at: <http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/3174.htm>.

Information on the number of GP practices which operate without being commissioned for services via a GMS contract is not available as this is outside the standard model for GP provision in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health to outline the rationale for the wearing of face masks in churches when those present remain socially distanced following arrival.

**(AQW 18463/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Coronavirus (COVID-19) usually spreads by droplets from coughs, sneezes and speaking. These droplets can also be picked up from surfaces, if you touch a surface and then your face without washing your hands first. The use of face coverings in certain indoor settings, including churches, is a proportionate and necessary response to the pandemic alongside other measures to help control the virus, such as social distancing, ventilation and regular hand hygiene.

It is important to follow all the other government advice on coronavirus (COVID-19) including the advice available on NI Direct on staying safe outside your home, at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-staying-safe-outside-your-home>

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Health to detail the findings of the Public Health Agency report on the safe and proportionate return to normalised visiting in care homes, including arrangements for visiting out.

**(AQW 18485/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** At the request of my Department, the Public Health Agency undertook the development of a plan to return to a more normal arrangement for visiting in care home settings.

I accepted their report which recommended a graduated approach to easing the restrictions in all care homes in Northern Ireland. My Department issued new visiting guidance for care homes here, "Visiting with Care - A Pathway", which has been effective from 7 May 2021. It is available on the Department of Health website, at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>.

This Pathway represents a significant easement in the restrictions formerly in place, and includes arrangements for residents to receive visitors, as well as facilitating residents to leave the home to visit other households, community facilities and excursions.

Progression along the pathway will be as fast as possible while fully taking into account the risks in specific areas and will be monitored by the Trusts, the Public Health Agency and the Department of Health.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health how many complaints have been made relating to delays in accessing GP services, in each of the last four years.

**(AQW 18506/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** I have been advised by the Health and Social Care Board that, during the last 4 years, the number of complaints received relating to delays in accessing GP services is as follows:

Year	Appointments	Telephone/Delay/Access	Total
2017/18	16	22	38
2018/19	10	34	44
2019/20	18	15	33
2020/21	10	18	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>143</b>

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health, following the announcement by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, whether people under the age of 40 living in Northern Ireland will be offered the ability to choose an alternative to the Oxford/AstraZenca vaccine.

**(AQW 18561/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** At the time of booking a Covid-19 vaccination appointment on the HSC booking portal, people under the age of 40 are being directed to the Citizen's Choice section which will provide information which offers them the ability to make an informed decision whether to take the Oxford/AstraZeneca or choose an alternative vaccine.

The JCVI advice of 7th May is that, as a precaution, it is preferable to offer people under the age of 40 with no underlying health conditions the choice of an alternative vaccine to the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine.

Those under the age of 40 are being offered an alternative vaccine, only where this is available and only if this does not cause any substantial delays in being vaccinated.

The JCVI position remains that the benefits of the COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca against COVID-19, with its associated risk of hospitalisation and death, continues to outweigh the risk from vaccination for the vast majority of people.

Anyone who has specific questions or concerns in respect of their personal circumstances will be able to discuss them with their GP, who is best placed to provide help and support.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health how vaccine stock management will be improved to ensure continued availability of Covid vaccines to community pharmacy.

**(AQW 18564/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Stock management of Covid-19 vaccine is very carefully monitored to ensure allocation to vaccinators most in need, due to the volume of their appointments. My department has a dedicated team to ensure the continued availability of vaccine to Community Pharmacy, together with the other Programmes.

To date the Community Pharmacy Programme has administered over 50,000 vaccination doses, with the only rate limiting factor being the available supply from the producers of the vaccine.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health whether there is a regional policy for respite care.

**(AQW 18571/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** There is no one regional short breaks or respite care policy that covers all Programmes of Care. The provision of scheduled short breaks of whatever nature or duration is based on an assessment of need with the resulting service response agreed with the individual and their family/carer and in line with the legislative and statutory duties placed on HSC.

The format of the assessment and potential range of services available will vary depending on age (i.e. child or adult) and the specific needs of the individual (i.e. Mental Health, Disability, Older People, Dementia etc).

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health how his Department is encouraging greater uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine by those aged between 30-39 years.

**(AQW 18592/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department is working closely with our delivery partners, including the PHA and community organisations to encourage greater uptake of the Covid-19 vaccine by those aged between 30-39 years; e.g. the PHA have prepared a targeted media campaign, currently underway, to encourage uptake by younger people, through social media and peer influencers, particularly from the fields of sport and entertainment.

The HSCNI Vaccination Dashboard provides a real time update on the of the programme's notable progress, particularly for those in the younger age cohorts with over 134,000, or 53.5% those in the age range of 30-39 years already vaccinated since the programme was opened to them from 30th April 2021. The Dashboard can be found at the following link:-

<https://covid-19.hscni.net/ni-covid-19-vaccinations-dashboard/>

While the rate limiting factor remains the availability of vaccine, the programme is continuing at a steady pace and has already met the target of vaccinating 1 million people in NI.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of a traffic light system for international travel during the pandemic.

**(AQW 18598/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Travel outside of NI is vital to connecting families, boosting businesses and underpinning the economy. The Executive also appreciate how much families are looking forward to their holidays when it is safe to do so. We also understand how important business and holiday travel is for airports and airlines, alongside the important transit of goods, which has been more essential than ever during the pandemic.

It is absolutely essential that any steps we take now lay the groundwork for a sustainable return to travel that is able to weather the challenges we continue to face, despite the success of our vaccine programme, which have been brought home to us so clearly by recent surges in infections and increasing prevalence of variants of concern in many other countries.

On 20 May the Executive agreed to the following list of countries being included on the green list from 24 May, without the need for people to quarantine on their return to Northern Ireland. The countries and territories are: Australia, Iceland, New Zealand, Faroe Islands, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Gibraltar, Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, Brunei, Falkland Islands, Portugal, Israel, and Singapore.

People arriving from these destinations are required to undertake a pre-departure test and to complete a UK passenger locator form together with a mandatory day 2 test.

In addition those arriving from Portugal, Israel or Singapore will be requested to take a voluntary Day 8 PCR test, which will be provided free of charge. This will be kept under review.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health, given that the decision has been taken to give under 40s vaccines other than AstraZeneca and that AstraZeneca is the only vaccine available via community pharmacies, whether he will make other vaccines available to community pharmacies, in order for those under 40 to be able to access vaccinations locally.

**(AQW 18622/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The JCVI advice of 7th May is that, as a precaution, it is preferable to offer people under the age of 40 with no underlying health conditions the choice of an alternative vaccine to the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine.

The JCVI position remains that the benefits of the COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca against COVID-19, with its associated risk of hospitalisation and death, continues to outweigh the risk from vaccination for the vast majority of people.

Those under the age of 40 are being offered an alternative vaccine, only where this is available and only if this does not cause any substantial delays in being vaccinated.

There are no plans to provide Pfizer vaccine to Community Pharmacies, as the handling requirements of Pfizer at low temperatures does not allow it to be stored in the required small quantities. It is important, however, that under 40s are given the choice of being vaccinated with AstraZeneca at their local community pharmacy.

To date the Community Pharmacy Programme has administered over 50,000 vaccination doses of AstraZeneca, with the only rate limiting factor being the available supply of the vaccine.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health what measures are being taken to enable proof of COVID-19 vaccinations to be presented for international travel when this is permitted.

**(AQW 18663/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Department of Health is working on a solution to enable proof of vaccination to the agreed standard. It is anticipated that a paper based option will be available in the first instance, from a specialist printing service. This requires infrastructure to be developed, allowing citizens to request certification which is securely linked to their personal data. Further details will follow shortly. In the meantime it should be noted that neither GP Practices or other HSC organisations are able to issue letters for travel purposes.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health how his Department will increase awareness post-pandemic of the benefits of breastfeeding.

**(AQW 18666/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Improving breastfeeding rates requires a multi-faceted approach, which is detailed within the 20 Actions of the Breastfeeding Strategy. PHA will continue post pandemic to increase awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding through established initiatives such as the UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative and the PHA Breastfeeding Welcome Here Scheme. It is essential that these internationally recognised standards continue to be maintained as we move out of the pandemic. PHA supports a number of CV sector organisations with providing information and support to expectant and new parents. These organisations are essential to raising awareness about the importance of breastfeeding to health, and to the public understanding of why it is a major public health issue. Initiatives such as these will ensure evidence based policies are in place, staff are trained and mothers and babies are well supported to get off to a good start with breastfeeding.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the latest regulations regarding the permitted size of wedding receptions; (ii) the dates and details of anticipated changes to these rules, including outdoor receptions; and (iii) any risk assessments that will be required prior to hosting wedding receptions.

**(AQW 18689/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Weddings and civil partnerships are celebratory social events, which are particularly prone to the spread of COVID-19 and restrictions are therefore necessary to reduce the risk of transmission.

The arrangements for weddings are as set out in The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021, available at:

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 | Department of Health (health-ni.gov.uk)

**A frequently asked question document is available on the Executive's website:** Guidance for marriages, civil partnerships or other celebratory events

Guidance for places of worship is also available at: Coronavirus (COVID-19): places of worship

From 24 May 2021, post wedding and civil partnership receptions are permitted, with the numbers determined by the venue on a risk assessed basis. To determine the maximum number of people permitted to attend an indoor gathering, in a non-domestic setting, the organiser or operator must carry out a risk assessment. Indoor gatherings of 15 people or fewer do not need a risk assessment.

A person responsible for organising a gathering must, if requested to do so by a relevant person, provide a copy of the risk assessment and an account of the reasonable measures taken. The organiser must also take all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of the coronavirus.

There are no restrictions on the number of people seated at the top table, but other tables should not exceed 10, with no household restriction. Children under 12 excluded are not counted for the table numbers. No dancing is permitted, except for the couple's first dance. Music must be at ambient level to permit normal conversation.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health what plans he has for a publicity campaign to promote getting the second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

**(AQW 18697/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department is working closely with our delivery partners, including the PHA and community organisations to promote uptake of both doses of the Covid-19 vaccine for maximum protection from the Covid virus.

Media campaigns have been produced both nationally and locally to send the message for people to become fully vaccinated for their own health and well-being but also for society, e.g. the powerful TV ad "Every vaccination brings us closer, together" delivers a message to look forward to travel and events, shared together.

My Department is particularly keen to reach out to younger people and is working with the PHA to produce a targeted media campaign. Uptake is being encouraged through social media and peer influencers, particularly from the fields of sport and entertainment.

While the rate limiting factor remains the availability of vaccine, the programme is continuing at a steady pace and has already administered over 590,000 second doses. The HSCNI Vaccination Dashboard provides a real time update of the programme's notable progress, and can be found at the following link:-

<https://covid-19.hscni.net/ni-covid-19-vaccinations-dashboard/>

The NI Vaccination Programme is specifically designed to appeal to as many people as possible to protect the population, particularly older and vulnerable citizens in our community and help us move gradually towards the easing of restrictions in society, when it is safe to do so.



**Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health to detail the current waiting list for mental health services in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, broken down by (i) time spent on the waiting list; and (ii) age bracket.

**(AQW 18736/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Department does not hold this information centrally and it was requested from the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT).

Table 1 sets out the number of active waits for mental health services in NHSCT, broken down by time bands.

Table 2 sets out the number of active waits for mental health services in NHSCT, broken down by age bands.

**Table 1: Number of active waits for mental health services in NHSCT, broken down by time bands, as at 31st March 2021.**

MH Service	0-3 Weeks	>3 to 6 weeks	>6 to 9 weeks	> 9 to 13 weeks	> 13 weeks	Total Waits
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service	98	61	75	39	50	323
Adult Mental Health	378	181	47	2	1	609
Dementia	118	60	45	28	273	524
Psychological Therapies	116	173	73	112	173	647
<b>Total</b>	<b>710</b>	<b>475</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>497</b>	<b>2,103</b>

**Source:** Northern Health and Social Care Trust

**Note:** Figures are taken from live administrative systems and are therefore subject to change.

**Table 2: Number of active waits for mental health services in the NHSCT, broken down by age bands, as at 31st March 2021.**

MH Service	0 - 17	18 - 64	65 +	Total Waits
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service	323	0	0	323
Adult Mental Health	3	561	45	609
Dementia	0	11	513	524
Psychological Therapies	150	478	19	647
<b>Total</b>	<b>476</b>	<b>1,050</b>	<b>577</b>	<b>2,103</b>

**Source:** Northern Health and Social Care Trust

**Note:** Figures are taken from live administrative systems and are therefore subject to change.

**Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health whether out of hours GP services will continue to be provided at Magherafelt Hospital.

**(AQW 18738/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Dalriada Urgent Care (DUC) is the organisation responsible for GP Out of Hours services provided in the Northern Area which includes Magherafelt.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic and the increasing use of remote consultations, fewer patients who contact GP Out of Hours services have needed to be seen face to face in an Out of Hours base.

After a review of infection control, staffing and patient safety issues at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic DUC's face to face services have been temporarily relocated from Ballymena, Whiteabbey and Magherafelt to the Antrim Hospital site.

The Coleraine centre remains on the Causeway Hospital site, and the Ballymena GP OOH base has become a Covid Centre site for the Northern Area.

The current arrangements for the provision of the OOHs service will be kept under review as we emerge from the current pandemic.

**Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) benefits of face coverings; and (ii) scientific evidence to prove their effectiveness.

**(AQW 18808/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The use of face coverings is now required in certain indoor settings across Northern Ireland, unless a person is exempt or has a reasonable excuse.

The best available scientific evidence is that, when used correctly, wearing a face covering may reduce the spread of coronavirus droplets in certain circumstances, helping to protect others.

Scientific evidence used by the Executive for decision making purposes is now publically available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

The Executive has committed to a four-week review cycle, where we monitor the data on a range of health and societal impacts, before considering what relaxations can be made safely. While the Executive formally reviews and make decisions on restrictions every four weeks, our monitoring cycle provides us with the ability to move more rapidly on emerging priorities should the need arise before the next review point. The next formal review of the coronavirus restrictions will be on 10 June 2021.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of family requests for an assessment for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in the last five years, broken down by (i) gender; (ii) education area; and (iii) a diagnosis of ADHD. **(AQW 18836/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** This AQW was transferred to my Department from Department of Education.

- (i) The number of referrals received by Health and Social Care Trusts for assessment of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in the previous five years is displayed by gender in Table 1.
- (ii) The number of referrals for ADHD assessments is not routinely collected by education area, and is therefore set out by Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust in Table 1.
- (iii) ADHD diagnoses are not routinely collected by my Department, and to obtain this would require a manual trawl of hundreds of files at a disproportionate cost.

**Table 1: Number of referrals received by Health and Social Care Trusts for an Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder assessment broken down by gender (2016/17 – 2020/21)**

HSC Trust	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
<b>Belfast</b>					
Female	159	152	185	149	111
Male	452	544	449	379	255
<b>Northern</b>					
Female	140	127	149	175	149
Male	516	449	543	549	391
<b>South Eastern</b>					
Female	124	113	180	204	135
Male	466	444	584	535	407
<b>Southern</b>					
Female	51	57	70	89	77
Male	283	299	359	350	307
<b>Western</b>					
Female	43	55	35	48	-
Male	227	231	240	203	-
<b>Northern Ireland</b>					
Female	517	504	619	665	-
Male	1,944	1,967	2,175	2,016	-

**Source:** Health and Social Care Trusts

**Notes:**

- The table only includes referrals made to HSC Trusts.
- South Eastern HSC Trust figures relate to calendar year, eg 2020/21 is the calendar year 2020.
- Western HSC Trust was not able to supply figures for 2020/21

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the connection between deprivation and obesity; and what action his Department intends to take to reduce the prevalence of obesity.

**(AQW 18864/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department leads on obesity prevention through the cross-Departmental framework 'A Fitter Future For All' and works across departments and agencies to tackle obesity. The link between deprivation and obesity is clear – trend data over the last 10 years shows that people from the most deprived quintile are more likely to be living with obesity than those either the median or the least deprived quintile. These trend tables are published online at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/tables-health-survey-northern-ireland>.

Obesity continues to be a key issue of concern in NI, with a strong social class gradient and serious implications for health. The drivers of weight are complicated and vary from person to person but include genetic make-up, biological and social factors. Socio economic factors such as unemployment or poverty play a key role in driving obesity and ill health. Tackling the problem at a societal level requires action by a wide range of sectors.

The Public Health Agency are the lead partner in delivering the outcomes of 'A Fitter Future For All'. The Agency invests in a number of obesity prevention programmes and continues to work with a range of other partners such as Department of Health, Department of Education, Department for Communities, Department for Infrastructure, Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, HSC Trusts, Primary Care, Local Government, Safefood, Food Standards Agency and many non-statutory partners to promote activities that will encourage healthy lifestyles that contribute to obesity prevention. The programmes commissioned, promoted and/or supported by PHA are grouped into themes of healthy eating, weight management, and physical activity.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 16881/17-22, on what date he requested support from the Executive for a Carers Payment.

**(AQW 18897/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** I wrote to Executive colleagues on this subject on 4 March 2021 and have subsequently followed this up with a second memo dated 20 May.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 18487/17-22, to detail (i) the average hourly expense to Health and Social Care Trusts for agency nursing staff in the year 2019-20; and (ii) the same average hourly expense for nurses directly employed by Trusts.

**(AQW 18903/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The charging structure within the Agency framework (that is payable by HSC to agencies) is made up of several elements including the equivalent Agenda for Change (AfC) hourly rate for a given pay band, experience level and shift. There should be no difference between what a Trust employee receives and an agency worker receives, assuming they are on the same pay Band and point of the AfC scale.

Whilst the basic hourly rate is the same as AfC, the amount that the agency pays to the individual could vary. Appointments made outside of the Framework will not be the same as they are based on individual agency costs and taking account of demand and supply for the specific post needing to be filled.

Precisely what an agency nurse is actually paid is not known to the HSC Trust.

HSC Trusts employ agency staff for several reasons, for example, cover for sickness and maternity/paternity leave; cover for existing vacancies; and when demand increases over the winter months. The primary aim of this is to ensure that safe and effective services are sustained at all times for patients and clients.

The Bengoa expert panel report warned of "stark increases in costs associated with locum and agency staff to provide a safe service where it is not possible to recruit to permanent positions". It made clear that rising locum and agency costs are due to the current configuration of services and that "changing the model of care" is the only solution. Pending this transformation, locum and agency expenditure is required to maintain safe services and keep hospital units open. It is accepted that ongoing stark increases in these costs are not sustainable in the long-term.

The agency worker expenditure provided in AQW 18487/17-22 relates to the total nursing & midwifery workforce including registered and support workers. During the period in question it is important to note that the directly employed HSC nursing & midwifery workforce increased by a headcount of 1,033 (4.7%), comparing staff numbers in post at 31st March 2016 with those in post at 31st March 2020. However, HSC nursing & midwifery vacancies actively in recruitment also increased during that period but reached a peak of 3,057 vacancies (12.0%) as at 30th June 2019.

A Regional Agency Reduction Implementation and Planning Group has been established to co-ordinate the improvement of staff utilisation, with the aim of reducing unsustainable agency spend, beginning with off-contract arrangements. The main function of the Group is to develop and implement a plan, with local and regional commitment and coordination, to safely facilitate, and manage the service impact of, reducing unsustainable agency and locum spend.

We are committed to sustained investment in growing the local nursing and midwifery workforce to meet ever increasing demands, for example, this year we have commissioned the highest ever number (1,325) of pre-registration nursing and midwifery training places.

This unprecedented level of intake will be maintained for a minimum of a further 2 years.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 18487/17-22, why the amount spent on agency nursing staff by Health and Social Care Trusts increased in 2019-20 to nearly 600 per cent of the cost in 2015-16.

**(AQW 18904/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The charging structure within the Agency framework (that is payable by HSC to agencies) is made up of several elements including the equivalent Agenda for Change (AfC) hourly rate for a given pay band, experience level and shift. There should be no difference between what a Trust employee receives and an agency worker receives, assuming they are on the same pay Band and point of the AfC scale.

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This unprecedented level of intake will be maintained for a minimum of a further 2 years.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health to outline the evidence base in favour of Minimum Unit Pricing for alcohol, including reference to early indications of its effectiveness in Scotland.

**(AQW 18917/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department previously commissioned a report from the University of Sheffield which concluded that a Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) for alcohol would be effective in reducing alcohol consumption, alcohol-related harms (including alcohol-related deaths, hospitalisations, crimes and workplace absences) and the costs associated with those harms. This report is available in full on the DoH website at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/alcohol-and-drug-mup-ni-report-from-university-of-sheffield.pdf>

MUP has been in place in Scotland from May 2018. With the first evaluation results now being published, initial signs are very encouraging that it is an effective measure, however it is still too early to be definitive.

Once finalised, NI's forthcoming new Substance Use Strategy will contain my commitment to have a full consultation on MUP within the next year. This consultation will examine a range of possible options in respect of alcohol pricing, including consideration of the emerging evidence of the effectiveness of MUP from Scotland and elsewhere. Any policy considerations arising from the consultation will be brought to the Executive in due course.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Health what steps he has taken to address the societal stigma of (i) mental ill health; and (ii) addiction.

**(AQW 18940/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The reduction of stigma around mental health is a key action within Protect Life 2, the Suicide Prevention Strategy for Northern Ireland. An extensive range of training and awareness programmes are being delivered to reduce stigma and increase understanding of mental health and wellbeing.

During 2010 – 2020, around £1 million has been invested in 334 programmes within local communities to encourage them to be pro-active in promoting positive mental health and emotional wellbeing through the promotion of the Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing.

Considerable promotion and engagement in Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Campaigns have also been delivered and the Covid Wellbeing NI Hub contains a wide variety of information and courses to support wellbeing.

With regards to substance use, there has been a range of additional work taken forward by the Department and the PHA to reduce the stigma around those seeking help – particularly in relation to harm reduction services. In order to further build on this, one of the actions in the forthcoming Substance Use Strategy is to work with services users, experts and key stakeholders to further address stigma as a way to reduce barriers to seeking treatment, to improve prevention and to reduce harm.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is planning to introduce the NHS Covid 19 Vaccination Certificate App, similar to the rest of the United Kingdom.

**(AQW 18946/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Citizens in NI are able to undertake international travel from Monday 24th May.

My Department is working on a solution to enable proof of vaccination to the recently agreed international standard. It is anticipated that a paper based option will be available in the first instance followed by a smartphone app at a later date. The overall solution requires infrastructure to be developed, allowing citizens to request certification, securely linking to their personal data.

In the meantime it should be noted that neither GP practices, or other HSC organisations, are able to issue letters for travel purposes.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health which members of the Blood Cancer community were invited to join the Cancer Strategy steering groups; and whether he has engaged with the Blood Cancer community.

**(AQW 18967/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** In 2019 coproduction work began on the development of a new 10 year Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland, with policy makers, health representatives, those with lived experience and charities actively working on its development.

Each of the seven sub-groups includes key expert representatives to contribute advice and opinions across HSC, charity and service user perspectives. There is representation from Bloodwise on the Palliative and End of Life Care sub-group. Consultant haematologists have participated in the treatment sub-group helping shape the recommendations of the Cancer Strategy.

In preparation for external consultation, Patient Client Council facilitated several stakeholder engagement events where several service users who had blood cancer were in attendance. In addition, CLIC Sargent facilitated specific engagement sessions for parents of children with cancer and for teenagers and young adults with cancer, most of whom had blood cancers.

Consideration has been given to ways of improving support for patients along the whole cancer pathway, such as recognising all cancer types and equal resources and accessibility for patients across cancer services, including blood cancer.

Work is also underway to implement the Oncology-Haematology Stabilisation Plan which, through 3 year expansion in local multi-disciplinary teams and an investment in advanced practice roles, will provide increased service capacity and resilience going forward. Vitally, this plan seeks to expand acute oncology provision, including that of haematology. It is extremely important that my Department receives the funding necessary to implement this plan in full.

There is no doubt that delivery of the Cancer Strategy has been delayed due 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.

The strategy will also include an implementation plan which will include key performance indicators and targets for the implementation of recommendations. This will be costed, monitored and reported upon.

In the meantime, the Public Health Agency's 'Be Cancer Aware' website, [www.becancerawareni.info](http://www.becancerawareni.info), which launched in 2015, provides information about cancer signs and symptoms, explains what to do if you are concerned, and signposts individuals to recommended sources of support or further information. This includes specific information on the signs and symptoms of some of the specific blood cancers including Hodgkin's and non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

In September last year I took part in Leukaemia & Lymphoma NI's Blood Cancer Awareness Month campaign launch. As with all cancers, it is vitally important that anyone experiencing signs and symptoms should seek early medical advice and treatment.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health, given the rising incidence of blood cancer diagnosis, whether the next Cancer Strategy will (i) recognise and give parity to blood cancers alongside solid tumour cancers; (ii) provide dedicated resources for blood cancer services; and (iii) provide equitable patient access to oncology and haematology medicines.

**(AQW 18968/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** In 2019 coproduction work began on the development of a new 10 year Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland, with policy makers, health representatives, those with lived experience and charities actively working on its development.

Each of the seven sub-groups includes key expert representatives to contribute advice and opinions across HSC, charity and service user perspectives. There is representation from Bloodwise on the Palliative and End of Life Care sub-group. Consultant haematologists have participated in the treatment sub-group helping shape the recommendations of the Cancer Strategy.

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There is no doubt that delivery of the Cancer Strategy has been delayed due 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.

The strategy will also include an implementation plan which will include key performance indicators and targets for the implementation of recommendations. This will be costed, monitored and reported upon.

In the meantime, the Public Health Agency's 'Be Cancer Aware' website, [www.becancerawareni.info](http://www.becancerawareni.info), which launched in 2015, provides information about cancer signs and symptoms, explains what to do if you are concerned, and signposts individuals to recommended sources of support or further information. This includes specific information on the signs and symptoms of some of the specific blood cancers including Hodgkin's and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

In September last year I took part in Leukaemia & Lymphoma NI's Blood Cancer Awareness Month campaign launch. As with all cancers, it is vitally important that anyone experiencing signs and symptoms should seek early medical advice and treatment.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health given the rising incidence of blood cancer diagnoses, whether the new Cancer Strategy will be supported by an implementation plan and dedicated resources to ensure increased capacity across haematology services to meet the target treatment time.

**(AQW 18969/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** In 2019 coproduction work began on the development of a new 10 year Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland, with policy makers, health representatives, those with lived experience and charities actively working on its development.

Each of the seven sub-groups includes key expert representatives to contribute advice and opinions across HSC, charity and service user perspectives. There is representation from Bloodwise on the Palliative and End of Life Care sub-group. Consultant haematologists have participated in the treatment sub-group helping shape the recommendations of the Cancer Strategy.

In preparation for external consultation, Patient Client Council facilitated several stakeholder engagement events where several service users who had blood cancer were in attendance. In addition, CLIC Sargent facilitated specific engagement sessions for parents of children with cancer and for teenagers and young adults with cancer, most of whom had blood cancers.

Consideration has been given to ways of improving support for patients along the whole cancer pathway, such as recognising all cancer types and equal resources and accessibility for patients across cancer services, including blood cancer.

Work is also underway to implement the Oncology-Haematology Stabilisation Plan which, through 3 year expansion in local multi-disciplinary teams and an investment in advanced practice roles, will provide increased service capacity and resilience going forward. Vitally, this plan seeks to expand acute oncology provision, including that of haematology. It is extremely important that my Department receives the funding necessary to implement this plan in full.

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**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health what his Department is doing to ensure that people will have increased access to their GP.

**(AQW 18974/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** GP practices are open and are providing face to face appointments for patients who are assessed as requiring them.

Recently collected figures indicate that in that particular week there were 164,137 GP and Practice Nurse consultations. That is a rate of 82 per 1,000 patients. Almost 40% of these were face to face.

For comparison, information collected in November 2019 shows a consultation rate of 86.8 per 1,000, of which 50% were face to face. The 2019 face to face activity would have included activities such as screening, which are now gradually being reintroduced.

General Practice has changed the way it works in responding to the current pandemic and despite the demands and capacity limits that COVID has created, GPs have maintained all of the core elements of general practice services.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has meant the introduction of innovative ways of working.

GP practices are operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients to continue to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required. Technologies such as video conferencing and enabling patients to send photographs by text have helped to facilitate diagnosis and ensure that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential.

I recognise that face to face appointments are valued by many people as the norm for GP delivered care and that patients have at times found it difficult to access GP services via telephone. However, the model of primary care in place prior to the pandemic was already under considerable pressure and was not sustainable without significant change.

The scale of demand for GP led services has continuously grown over recent years. Figures collected in November 2019 indicate that total contacts with general practice stood at almost 15 million per year. For comparison, in 2014 the estimated total number of contacts was 12.7 million.

The need for transformation in primary care was already clear and initiatives such as the Multi-Disciplinary Team Programme; investment in technology, including telephony; the introduction of Advanced Nurse Practitioners and additional General Practice Nurses were making a difference to how services are delivered in primary care.

The use of more innovative ways of working, including telephone triage and telephone and video consultations, is now widely embedded within the primary care sector. As we emerge from COVID, it will be necessary to complement traditional ways of working by building upon new approaches, including the use of digital innovation and skills mix, to help ensure the sustainability of GP services in the face of increasing pressures and demands.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) Terms of Reference for the Public Inquiry into Neurology; (ii) timescale for the Inquiry; and (iii) psychological support Neurology patients now and throughout the Inquiry.

**(AQW 18977/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** A link to the Terms of Reference for the Independent Neurology Inquiry (INI) is attached: <https://neurologyinquiry.org.uk/sites/ini/files/media-files/Independent%20Neurology%20Inquiry%20Terms%20of%20Reference%2011-12-%202020.pdf>

The INI was announced in May 2018. The INI operates independently of all bodies, including the Department of Health. In December 2020, I converted the INI from a non-statutory public inquiry to a statutory public inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005. As was made clear in my statement at the time, this change in status was not intended to add to or alter the work or timescales of the INI, nor was it intended to change the way that evidence has been gathered or how public access has been provided. The Inquiry Panel is determined to produce a meaningful report which addresses all relevant issues, and in doing so it is necessary to adequately investigate all lines of enquiry. The Inquiry is mindful of the processes involved in producing a final report. It is therefore not possible at this stage to provide an indicative timescale in relation to the final report.

Patients impacted by the Neurology Recall will continue to be supported by the Belfast Trust. Patients who have been recalled have access to an expedited psychology pathway. A Neurology Advice Line, 0800 9801100, is also open Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm and Saturday and Sunday from 9am to 1pm. Patients also have access to the Neurological Care Advisory Service.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health how many people had taken a Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor in the weeks before their death, for each year since 2019.

**(AQW 18985/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Business Services Organisation holds information on medicines prescribed in primary care and subsequently dispensed by a community pharmacist. However, this information is not routinely linked to mortality data, which is owned by the General Register Office for Northern Ireland.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the Health Service's cyber security measures, including levels of funding and staffing arrangements.  
**(AQW 18987/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Effective cyber-security is achieved through an array of initiatives and investments that combine: dedicated cyber-security resources with specialised skills; collaboration between cyber, infrastructure and networks teams across an enterprise; modern hardware that has built-in preventative measures; a strong Enterprise Architecture capability that 'designs-in' security to all systems; a number of tools for detection, compliance and protection of IT assets; and a persistent operational management and monitoring capability.

In response to the rise in cyber-attacks Health and Social Care organisations regularly review such investments in cyber-security measures. This work is managed by the HSC Cyber-Security Programme, instigated in response to the 2017 NHS Wannacry attacks.

Cyber criminals are known to access publically available information in relation to potential targets to ascertain nature of counter measures and strength of cyber defences. Therefore, in line with industry best practise, details of resources allocated to this work are not normally publicised.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health why COVID restrictions in Northern Ireland differ from the rest of the United Kingdom in relation to overseas holidays.  
**(AQW 19005/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Travel outside of NI is vital to connecting families, boosting businesses and underpinning the economy. The Executive also appreciate how much families are looking forward to their holidays when it is safe to do so. We also understand how important business and holiday travel is for airports and airlines, alongside the important transit of goods, which has been more essential than ever during the pandemic.

It is absolutely essential that any steps we take now lay the groundwork for a sustainable return to travel that is able to weather the challenges we continue to face, despite the success of our vaccine programme, which have been brought home to us so clearly by recent surges in infections and increasing prevalence of variants of concern in many other countries.

On 20 May the Executive agreed to the following list of countries being included on the green list from 24 May, without the need for people to quarantine on their return to Northern Ireland. The countries and territories are: Australia, Iceland, New Zealand, Faroe Islands, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Gibraltar, Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, Brunei, Falkland Islands, Portugal, Israel, and Singapore.

People arriving from these destinations will be required to undertake a pre-departure test and to complete a UK passenger locator form together with a mandatory day 2 test.

In addition we will also request those arriving from Portugal, Israel or Singapore to take a voluntary Day 8 PCR test, which will be provided free of charge. This will be kept under review.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health to outline the laws governing the sale of illegal drugs.  
**(AQW 19009/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department has a statutory obligation to ensure compliance with national and international legislative requirements regarding the sale of medicines. The governing medicines-related legislation under which it acts includes the Human Medicines Regulations 2012, the Medicines Act 1968 and the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (together with a raft of attendant subordinate legislation), the Pharmacy (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 and the Poisons (Northern Ireland) Order 1976.

My Department, working with key partner agencies such as the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), UK Border Force, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Department of Justice, continues to be extremely proactive in acting against those who willingly import or unlawfully sell illicit medicines.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health what work his Department has carried out on the impact of minimum unit pricing for alcohol; and its impact on those in poverty or deprived areas.  
**(AQW 19021/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department previously commissioned a report from the University of Sheffield which concluded that a Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) for alcohol would be effective in reducing alcohol consumption, alcohol-related harms (including alcohol-related deaths, hospitalisations, crimes and workplace absences) and the costs associated with those harms. This report is available in full on the DoH website at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/alcohol-and-drug-mup-ni-report-from-university-of-sheffield.pdf>



One of the main conclusions from the modelling used by the University of Sheffield is that MUP would have larger impacts on those in poverty, particularly high-risk drinkers, than those not in poverty. However, those in poverty would also experience larger relative gains in health and are estimated to marginally reduce their spending due to their reduced drinking under the policy.

Once finalised, NI's forthcoming new Substance Use Strategy will contain my commitment to have a full consultation on MUP within the next year. This consultation will examine a range of possible options in respect of alcohol pricing, including consideration of the emerging evidence of the effectiveness of the real-time impact of MUP from Scotland and elsewhere. Any policy considerations arising from the consultation will be brought to the Executive in due course.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of (i) new; and (ii) repeat prescriptions issued by each GP practice in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 19030/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** It is not possible to detail the number of new and repeat prescriptions issued by each GP practice in each of the last five years. A repeat dispensing scheme, whereby a patient receives a set of prescriptions at one time, which are then presented to the pharmacist and dispensed when required, is available in Northern Ireland. However, not all practices use this system. It is also not possible to tell from this system if a batch of prescriptions were new or a repeat of a previous batch.

Also, the majority of repeat prescriptions are not issued via the repeat dispensing service; instead, a patient will contact their practice to ask for a repeat of medication previously received. There is no tracking on the system that can identify if prescriptions are new or repeat.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of patients registered in each GP practice.

**(AQW 19031/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Business Services Organisation publishes the number of patients registered in each GP practice within the quarterly General Medical Services Statistics publication. The most recent quarterly publication reports data up to the quarter ending December 2020 and is available at General Medical Services Statistics ([hscni.net](http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/3174.htm)) (<http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/3174.htm>). Table 1.6 within this publication contains patient numbers registered by General Practice each quarter. The next release is due on 10th June 2021 and will report data up to the quarter ending March 2021.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Health which hospitals use a cash only payment system for parking.

**(AQW 19034/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The majority of public car parks on hospital sites across the Health and Social Care estate currently operate a cash only payment system with the exception of the following:

- Royal Victoria Hospital (5 of 6 pay stations offer cashless option)
- Belfast City Hospital (cashless option expected to be operational in June 2021)
- Altnagelvin Hospital (card/contactless option available)
- South West Acute Hospital (a pilot for a card payment option is underway)

The Northern and South Eastern Trusts are currently working on implementing a card/contactless payment system on their hospital sites.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Health to outline the measures his Department has taken to afford people living with dementia additional protection during the pandemic.

**(AQW 19035/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The COVID-19 pandemic has created many challenges for everyone, but particularly for those in vulnerable, at risk groups and their carers. As I am sure you are aware this is especially true for people living with a dementia who, because of cognitive impairment, may have difficulty in understanding the changes which COVID-19 has forced upon us e.g. use of PPE and social distancing, or the reasons for these changes. Many people living with dementia will have other significant health vulnerabilities and needs that place them at particular risk from the COVID-19 virus.

Measures have been put in place to provide protection against the virus for people living with a dementia, either in their own homes or in a care home setting. This protection includes the appropriate application of Infection Prevention and Control measures such as the use of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment by care staff; the introduction of social distancing wherever possible and restrictions on visiting within care homes.

It remains my position that care home visiting and implementation of the care partner role is of critical importance to the health and wellbeing of care home residents and in particular those with a dementia.

Current guidance sets out our clear expectation of care homes in relation to care partners. My Department, alongside the PHA, is working to support care homes to implement care partner arrangements, with over 2,600 care partners currently in place. Where homes are seeking to implement visiting and care partner guidance, funding has been available to them.

New guidance which will facilitate increased visiting in all care settings in Northern Ireland has been issued, and came into effect from Friday, 7 May 2021. The new visiting guidance for care homes sets out an agreed new approach to supporting safe and proportionate increased visiting in care homes. This includes updated arrangements for the safe management of care home residents receiving visitors, as well as residents being able to visit other households, community facilities and take part in excursions.

Health Trusts have been asked to assure themselves that care homes are operating in accordance with the visiting guidance. Trusts are also continuing to work with individual care homes to provide the support they might require to move forward with the facilitation of safely managed and meaningful visiting arrangements and implementation of the care partner concept.

A number of regional supports have also been made available to care homes with dementia units including staffing and financial support, and on a regional and Trust basis, the provision of extra training and education sessions related to supporting dementia residents and care staff. The aim of this being to understand and respond to changes in behaviour in people with a dementia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, Health Trusts were requested to develop support plans that ensure that they and service providers are working closely together to maintain services in a safe and effective way. Along with the Community and Voluntary sector, Trusts continue to provide local support to people with a dementia and their carers. This has included telephone calls to provide information and offer reassurance and the use of other technologies including Apps and video links. Trust Memory Services have also adapted to current circumstances and through the use of technology and other innovative practices, are able to undertake assessments and care reviews.

Over the course of the pandemic the HSC, including my Department, has and will continue to provide information and guidance in relation to a range of COVID-19 related issues that impact on those who have a dementia, whether they live in the community or are placed in a care home setting. Work has been ongoing to ensure that all messaging is presented in a format that is accessible and easily understood, and information about dementia and COVID-19 is available on the NI Direct and Department of Health websites.

I am also pleased that people living with dementia who are in receipt of residential or nursing home care were among the top priority groups for the first round of vaccinations. Further to this the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines in all NI care homes is now complete.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the work of his Department in relation to making dementia a stand-alone priority through the ongoing reform of the adult social care system.

**(AQW 19037/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** In relation to the Reform of Adult Social Care, the Expert Panel's report 'Power to People - Proposals to Reboot Adult Social Care' set out sixteen high level proposals to address the challenges faced by the Adult Social Care system in Northern Ireland. My Department established a Reform of Adult Social Care Project and a number of work streams to consider how each of the Power to People proposals could be taken forward. These proposals were merged into the six strategic priorities listed below:

- 1 **A Valued Workforce** - Staff who work in Social Care will be valued, competent and resilient.
- 2 **Individual Choice and Control** - To ensure the individual has control over the decisions affecting their social wellbeing and their care and support needs.
- 3 **Prevention and Early Intervention** - A renewed focus on prevention and early intervention to support people to achieve their own social wellbeing.
- 4 **Supporting Carers** - Carers will be supported in their caring duties and entitled to support in their own right.
- 5 **Primacy of Home** - The purposes of adult social care, including group care services, is to support citizens to live well in their own home in connection to their families, social networks and communities, providing maximum choice and control of their daily living arrangements and their care and support provision.
- 6 **Sustainable System Building** - To build a stable, sustainable adult social care system.

Although The Power to People report did not identify dementia as a standalone priority, the area would cut across the six strategic priorities and be positively impacted by all the recommendations.

The Health and Social Care workforce is working on behalf of everyone in society to provide vital care for the most vulnerable, including those living with dementia, and the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the invaluable role and commitment of HSC staff, including those social care workers in the Independent Sector employed in all care settings.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health to detail the recruitment plans for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service in West Tyrone.

**(AQW 19048/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) maintains a rolling recruitment programme for On-Call Firefighters. The next On-Call recruitment campaign is scheduled to commence at the end of June 2021, for appointments from January 2022 onwards.

Within West Tyrone, Newtownstewart and Castlederg stations are likely to fill vacancies as part of this campaign. Omagh and Strabane do not require recruitment at present.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health, given the apparent medical consensus that Ivermectin is proving effective against COVID-19, why is it not available to be prescribed in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 19057/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Ivermectin is not currently authorised in the UK or EU for the treatment or prevention of COVID-19 and the UK or EU medicines regulators have not received any applications for its use in this way.

A research article (The FDA-approved drug ivermectin inhibits the replication of SARS-CoV-2 in vitro) in the Antiviral Research publication in June 2020 described the effect of ivermectin on SARS-CoV-2 in a laboratory setting. Laboratory studies such as this are common at early stages of drug development. However, additional testing is needed in humans to determine whether ivermectin might be appropriate to prevent or treat COVID-19. Until further evidence is available, ivermectin should only be used for the treatment or prevention of COVID-19 in a controlled clinical trial setting.

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health to detail the funding awarded by the Health and Social Care Trusts and his Department for mental health support for the Community and Voluntary Sector, broken down by constituency.

**(AQW 19064/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Funding allocations are provided by Health and Social Care Trust rather than by constituency, therefore this information is not available.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the New Decade, New Approach commitment to funding for an addiction centre in Derry.

**(AQW 19085/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Under the heading "Addressing Northern Ireland's Unique Circumstances" within "New Decade, New Approach", the UK Government committed to making funding available for a number of areas, which could include additional funding to support the Derry/Londonderry addiction centre. It is anticipated that the level of funding made available will not be sufficient to cover all the areas set out in New Decade, New Approach. It is my understanding that the specific projects this funding is aimed at supporting are to be determined by a joint board which includes the Secretary of State and the First and deputy First Ministers.

Neither my Department nor the Health & Social Care Board nor the Public Health Agency have been involved directly in this process to date. We would obviously welcome any further investment in substance use services, however this needs to be in line with identified need and our priorities for service development within the strategic commissioning and planning processes.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has any plans to carry out a review of addiction services.

**(AQW 19086/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Alcohol and drugs services across Northern Ireland are provided in line with the Regional Alcohol & Drugs Commissioning Framework through a combination of Primary and Secondary Care services commissioned by the Health & Social Care Board, along with prevention, treatment and support services commissioned by the Public Health Agency.

The forthcoming new Substance Use Strategy contains a commitment to develop a new strategic planning framework for alcohol and drug services in NI. Future funding for substance use services will be reviewed in line with the new strategy and this new framework. In the meantime, resources for substance use services continue to be managed on a regional basis.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of the number of admissions made by each Health and Social Care Trust to the Northland Addiction Treatment Centre in Derry, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 19087/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The number of referrals received from each HSC Trust to the Northlands Addiction Treatment Centre: 2018 – 2020

	Western HSC Trust	Northern HSC Trust	Southern HSC Trust	S. Eastern HSC Trust	Belfast HSC Trust
2018	16	4	3	0	0
2019	21	4	1	0	0
2020	6	0	0	0	0

**Source:** Northlands Addiction Centre

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health (i) to provide details of any plans to introduce a mechanism for travellers to provide confirmation of a COVID-19 vaccination, similar to those being discussed in Great Britain; and (ii) what plans he has to enable Northern Irish people to access a relevant NHS app to facilitate this.

**(AQW 19107/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Department of Health is working on a mechanism to enable proof of vaccination to the agreed standard for travellers. It is anticipated that a paper based option will be available in the first instance, from a specialist printing service.

This process requires infrastructure to be developed, allowing citizens to request certification which is securely linked to their personal data. Further details will follow shortly.

There are currently no plans for a mechanism to enable Northern Irish people to access a relevant NHS app to facilitate travel to and from Northern Ireland.

In the meantime it should be noted that neither GP Practices nor other HSC organisations are able to issue letters for travel purposes.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to detail the amount of blood donated in each of the last five years.

**(AQW 19111/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The information requested is not available within the Department. The Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service (NIBTS) was approached for information. Please see below information provided by the NIBTS detailing the units of whole blood and platelets donated in the last five years.

**Units of whole blood and platelets donated to the Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service in the last five years, 2016/17-2020/21.**

Donations	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Whole Blood	48,542	43,706	43,828	40,914	37,491
Platelets	4,632	4,434	4,127	4,196	3,403
<b>Total Donations</b>	<b>53,174</b>	<b>48,140</b>	<b>47,955</b>	<b>45,110</b>	<b>40,894</b>

**Source:** Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service.

**Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health when he will sign off the Occupational Therapy Workforce Review Report that was completed in 2017.

**(AQW 19124/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Department has completed a series of AHP workforce reviews including Occupational Therapy which commenced in 2017. Their aim is to ensure the availability of an AHP workforce capable of meeting current and future demands across all services. Work on finalising the Occupational Therapy Workforce review has continued throughout the pandemic. The review has now been finalised and is one of a number of reviews to go to the Top Management Group (TMG) for consideration in the near future. The reviews will then be forwarded to me for approval and publication on the Department's website.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health whether there have been any cyber attacks on the Health Service in 2021.

**(AQW 19128/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Assessments provided by the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) highlight the public sector organisations as being an attractive target for malicious cyber actors. HSC organisations regularly experience attempted cyber-attacks and they continue to enhance defences and security operations.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health when the recommendations from the Speech and Language Workforce Review 2018 will be fully implemented.

**(AQW 19137/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** My Department is committed to taking forward the recommendations contained in the Speech and Language Therapy Workforce Review Report, including those which relate to further expansions in pre-registration training places. However, funding for the proposed expansions in this pre-registration programme will be required on a recurrent, multi-year basis. The current budgetary pressures facing my Department mean that there is no funding for any such expansion.

In the field of healthcare, funding is always finite and the need seemingly infinite, so inevitably it is necessary to prioritise. I have placed on record my view that the 2021/22 budget for my Department is extremely disappointing. While the additional resource allocations provided are to be welcomed, the non-recurrent nature of much of this funding means that I face some very difficult decisions.

The present funding model that we operate within is simply not fit for purpose, particularly so when considering long term investment in providing and skilling up the workforce. What is really needed is sustained investment and multi-year Budget settlements.

I can assure you the need to expand this programme will be considered, alongside other Departmental priorities, in future budget build exercises

In relation to other recommendations from the Speech and Language Workforce Review, the AHP Programme Steering Group recently approved the further development of a Workforce Review Implementation Plan for all AHPs, including Speech and Language Therapy. As part of this Plan, a Regional AHP Professional Advisory Forum will soon be established by the Department's Chief AHP Officer.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Health, in relation to the £500 special recognition payment for Health and Social Care staff on the Business Service Organisation payroll, whether there are any staff that would be exempt from the payment if they were on sick leave, or other forms of leave, during 2020.

**(AQW 19141/17-22)**

**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>

As set out in the FAQ, anyone who was off work shielding or on any form of maternity/shared parental/adoption leave is treated for the purposes of the payment as having been in work, and will have their contracted hours reflected in their payment.

Similarly, any staff member who was absent due to illness will have their normal hours included in the calculation. Only periods of illness in which a staff member is on a zero rate of pay are NOT included.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans for a pay rise for nurses in this financial year.

**(AQW 19160/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The pay round for 2021/22 for NHS and HSC staff has not yet been finalised.

Any decision on a pay award for nurses and other NI health workers, will be taken after the pay review bodies make their recommendations. I do not intend to pre-empt those recommendations. The NHS Pay Review Body is now expected to publish its report in June 2021.

Please be assured that both I and my Department remain committed to a fair pay settlement for all our healthcare staff going forward.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health whether mental health workers, working as part of the Multi-Disciplinary Teams, will be employed by GP Federations or the Health Trusts in the future roll out of MDTs.

**(AQW 19166/17-22)**

**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.

Across the current MDT areas, 5 Mental Health Managers and 56.46 Mental Health Practitioners (whole time equivalent figures) are employed. All are GP Federation employees and there are currently no plans to change the employment status of these staff or newly recruited MDT Mental Health employees going forward.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health given that Scotland, Wales and England now have systems either in place or in development, to detail the solutions his Department is considering in regards to proving COVID-19 vaccination status for those seeking to travel.

**(AQW 19175/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The NI Vaccination Programme is being concentrated on the vaccination of the population to protect everyone, particularly older and vulnerable citizens in our community. It will also help us move gradually towards the easing of restrictions in society, and particularly for travel, when it is safe to do so.

The Department of Health is working on a solution to enable proof of vaccination to the agreed standard. It is anticipated that a paper based option will be available in the first instance, from a specialist printing service. This requires infrastructure to be developed, allowing citizens to request certification which is securely linking to their personal data. Further details will follow shortly. In the meantime it should be noted that neither GP practices or other HSC organisations are able to issue letters for travel purposes.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health to list each COVID-19 vaccine that is available per (i) vaccination centre; (ii) GP practice; and (iii) community pharmacy.

**(AQW 19189/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The following is a list which details each Covid-19 vaccine available for each of the Covid-19 Programmes:-

Trust	Vaccine administered
Northern Trust	Pfizer only
Southern Trust	Pfizer only
Belfast Trust	Pfizer only
Western Trust	Pfizer and AstraZeneca
SSE Arena	Pfizer and AstraZeneca
GP Practices	AstraZeneca only
Community Pharmacy	AstraZeneca only

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 18779/17-22, (i) how many positions are on the Autism Forum; and (ii) what is the ratio between HSC representatives and others.

**(AQW 19190/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Autism Forum will not be confined to a specific number of positions or ratios in its configuration, rather it will be based upon the needs and work being undertaken by the Forum at any given time. As previously stated in AQW 18779/17-22, an invitation extended to twenty one organisations, of which nine accepted. This invitation requested a nominee from the organisation and also a person with lived experience, for example an autistic person, family member or carer. Some members of the Forum fulfil a dual role.

The Health and Social Care sector is represented by the Health and Social Care Board and cross-departmental representation is fulfilled by my Department. Additional members will be invited to attend the group as required.

It should be noted that while this Autism Forum will inform development and co-production of a longer term autism strategy at a strategic level, my Department will also continue to participate in regional multi-agency autism forums in each Trust area, these are comprised of people with lived experience, multi-disciplinary clinicians, community and voluntary groups and public and government sector representatives. This will enable wider consultative input and co-production of a longer term strategy and influence the shaping of future policy and service in relation to autism.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health whether the vaccination centre in the SSE Arena administers (i) only Oxford AstraZeneca vaccinations; (ii) Oxford AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccinations; or (iii) Pfizer only vaccinations.

**(AQW 19192/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Vaccination Centre at the SSE Arena administers both the AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines. Due to fluctuations in vaccine supply, there have been short periods of time when the Pfizer vaccine was only available as second doses.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health whether consideration has been given to the relaxation of face masks during indoor church services and worship.

**(AQW 19227/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Face coverings are mandatory within a place of worship and when entering or leaving, except for the person leading the service and the two parties to a marriage or civil partnership or if a person has a reasonable excuse. No special consideration has been given to relaxing this requirement in churches.

The Executive has committed to a four-week review cycle, where we monitor the data on a range of health and societal impacts, before considering what relaxations can be made safely. While the Executive formally reviews and make decisions on restrictions every four weeks, our monitoring cycle provides us with the ability to move more rapidly on emerging priorities should the need arise before the next review point. The next formal review of the coronavirus restrictions will be on 10 June 2021.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to make funding for access to Medtronic Continuous Glucose Monitors available through his Department or Health and Social Care Trusts.

**(AQW 19233/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The use of Continuous Glucose Monitoring (CGM) systems may not be appropriate for all patients to manage diabetes, however, where this treatment option is deemed clinically appropriate, it would be funded by the appropriate Health and Social Care Trust, subject to available resources.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health when 16-17 year olds who are deemed vulnerable and meet the criteria for vaccination online, but don't meet the criteria over the phone, will receive their COVID-19 vaccine.

**(AQW 19237/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The member will be aware that 16-17 year olds who are deemed vulnerable are included in Priority Group 6.

Those who are 16-64 years and clinically extremely vulnerable (not in residential care) have been invited for vaccination by their GP since 22 February, by means of a telephone call. Those who are 16-64 years and clinically vulnerable (not in residential care) have been offered a vaccination appointment via the HSC booking portal since 8 March. They would require a letter from their GP to take with them to their appointment.

The telephone number for bookings has been arranged for those who are unable to access the booking portal and therefore there is no barrier to those making a call.

The member will appreciate the programme is responding to many complex scenarios, and therefore calls may not have been made to the most appropriate provider for their eligibility criteria. It is however designed to be pragmatic, agile and flexible, and will continue to proactively seek to vaccinate all those in priority groups not already vaccinated.

A management information report is produced internally within the Department to monitor progress of the vaccination programme and provide details of those not yet vaccinated. This is to facilitate maximum vaccine deployment and uptake, and keep vaccine wastage to a minimum.

If a person has an issue with booking an appointment there is a dedicated email address for queries, at:-

Covid-19VaccinationProgramme@health-ni.gov.uk

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health whether he will bring forward proposals as a matter of urgency to harmonise travel restrictions and isolation rules for holidays within the Common Travel Area with those relating to overseas holidays.

**(AQW 19310/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** Travel outside of NI is vital to connecting families, boosting businesses and underpinning the economy. The Executive also appreciate how much families are looking forward to their holidays when it is safe to do so.

It is absolutely essential that any steps we take now lay the groundwork for a sustainable return to travel that is able to weather the challenges we continue to face, despite the success of our vaccine programme, which have been brought home to us so clearly by recent surges in infections and increasing prevalence of variants of concern in many other countries.

From 24 May we have decided to remove the essential travel reasons requirement for Common Travel Area travel. The guidance on self-isolation will be retained but with two new exemptions to this:

- visits to family and friends;
- those who have completed mandatory managed quarantine on arrival at a point of entry elsewhere in the CTA and travelled directly to Northern Ireland.

Those exempt from self-isolation will be asked in guidance to take a pre-departure LFD test, and LFD tests and days 2 and 8 post arrival in Northern Ireland.

On 20 May the Executive agreed to the following list of countries being included on the green list from 24 May, without the need for people to quarantine on their return to Northern Ireland. The countries and territories are: Australia, Iceland, New Zealand, Faroe Islands, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Gibraltar, Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, Brunei, Falkland Islands, Portugal, Israel, and Singapore.

People arriving from these destinations are required to undertake a pre-departure test and to complete a UK passenger locator form together with a mandatory day 2 test.

In addition, those arriving from Portugal, Israel or Singapore are requested to take a voluntary Day 8 PCR test, which will be provided free of charge. This will be kept under review.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health what information is collected on the prevalence in specific geographocal locations of (i) severe headaches; (ii) nausea; and (iii) vomiting.

**(AQW 19388/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** This information is not collected centrally; if recorded, it would only be recorded on GP practice clinical systems. Also, GPs may not always be informed of the occurrence of these conditions and in such cases, their occurrence would not be recorded at all.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Health (i) whether there has been full recall of patients that have undergone a procedure for female sterilisation utilising the Essure device; and (ii) for an update on his Department's work to address the waiting list of women requiring surgery as a result of Essure devices.

**(AQW 20555/17-22)**

**Mr Swann:** The Essure device is no longer in use in Northern Ireland. Most Health and Social Care Trusts stopped using this device in 2017, with the Belfast HSC Trust ceasing use in 2016.

The advice from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) was that the devices were acceptably safe to use and there was no evidence to suggest any increased risk to patient safety.

As such, a full recall of patients who have undergone a procedure for female sterilisation using the device has not been considered necessary.

Women requiring surgery as a result of Essure device complications are added to the gynaecology waiting list which is managed in chronological order, with the most urgent patients seen and treated first, although currently only emergency surgery in life-critical and cancer cases is able to take place. On 15th June 2021, I published an Elective Care Framework, the purpose of which 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.

## Department for Infrastructure

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of flooding issues in Stockmans Lane, Belfast.

**(AQW 18576/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** My officials carried out an investigation into the recent flooding that occurred on Stockman's Lane during which it was noted that water was discharging from Musgrave Park onto Stockman's Lane carriageway. Liaison with Belfast City Council, which manages Musgrave Park, is ongoing to determine how this can be prevented.

A follow-up investigation also identified a number of broken connections to the existing road drainage system and work instructions to carry out the necessary remedial work have now issued to our contractor.

In relation to infrastructure improvements in the Stockman's Lane locality, my Department's Living With Water Programme seeks to promote a new approach to the provision of drainage and wastewater infrastructure, which promotes holistic and integrated solutions that achieve multiple benefits at reduced cost with less disruption.

Public consultation has recently concluded on Living With Water in Belfast – An Integrated Plan for Drainage and Wastewater Management in Greater Belfast. The plan includes delivery of major sewerage and drainage network improvements in the Boucher Road / Stockman's Lane areas through NI Water's Glenmachan Sewerage Improvement Project which, subject to funding and approvals, is scheduled to commence in 2021/22.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment of the impact the recent Planning Appeals Commission decision 2020/A0017 to grant planning permission to a major housing development over the line of the disused railway track at Victoria Road, Derry will have on her vision of an all-island strategic rail network; and (ii) whether her Department will exercise its oversight and scrutiny role to examine how this material planning consideration factored into any decision.

**(AQW 18583/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The All Island Strategic Rail Review which I announced last month, along with Transport Minister Eamon Ryan TD, will allow us to consider our network across this island to view how we can improve it for everyone. 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, including the North-West.

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. During this exercise, the Review will consider the high level viability of any new connections including the potential benefits and risks to any proposed rail track including the current structures or planning approvals in place.

The planning application has been through the full rigours of local decision-making including an appeal before the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC), an independent appellant body and their decision is final. The opportunity to bring all material planning matters before the PAC was open to all parties including the Council and the local community. The Department, as regional planning authority, had no prior knowledge of or role in this local planning process.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of complaints her Department has raised with utility companies, regarding the quality of their reinstatement work, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18637/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Utility companies are responsible for the permanent reinstatement of roads to an agreed specification. When utility companies do not reinstate roads in a satisfactory manner, the Department applies the procedures for inspection of reinstatements and for dealing with reinstatement failures as set out in the Northern Ireland Road Authority and Utilities Committee (NIRAUC) Code of Practice for Inspections.



I can confirm there were 895 failed inspections in 2018/19, 1024 in 2019/20 and 757 in 2020/21 when a utility company did not carry out a reinstatement to an acceptable standard. The reinstatement defects were subsequently notified to the company responsible for the necessary remedial works.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has received Barnett consequentials as a result of England's Future High Streets Fund to enable her Department to regenerate city and town centres in Northern Ireland.  
**(AQW 18719/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My department has not received any Barnett consequentials from this fund. Barnett consequentials that derive from additional spending on comparable services in England are unhypothecated. Therefore, it is for the Executive to determine how this funding is used, based on its own priorities.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much has her Department paid out to adopt roads that should have been funded by developers, in each of the last ten years.  
**(AQW 18734/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The majority of new developments are successfully completed by developers and then adopted by my Department. Where a development has been determined for adoption under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980, the developer is responsible for providing roads and footways to a standard suitable for adoption by my Department. It is illegal for a developer to start a new development without first entering into an Agreement to provide roads, secured by a road bond. Where a developer starts without an Agreement and bond, my officials can progress enforcement action.

Where a development is not progressing, my officials will generally encourage the developer to complete the development in a timely manner. Should a developer fail to respond, my officials can then issue an enforcement notice. Where this course of action is unsuccessful, my Department can complete the works and seek to reclaim these costs from the surety or developer.

Over the last 10 years my Department has undertaken works to complete road infrastructure in a number of developments prior to adoption. Where this has occurred, my officials seek to recoup the full cost from either the surety or the developer. This is often a complex and lengthy process. Unfortunately, information on the final outturn cost of these works to my Department is not readily available.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of current departmental private street inspectors, compared to before the most recent Voluntary Exit Scheme.  
**(AQW 18735/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I understand that, prior to the NICS Voluntary Exit Scheme in 2014/2015, the former Department for Regional Development had 43.5 full time equivalent staff undertaking private streets functions across Northern Ireland.

Following VES, the number of full time equivalent staff in the Department for Infrastructure currently undertaking these functions is 22.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 18019/17-22, for her assessment of the risks to (i) public health; and (ii) the environment from identified sewage overflow incidents.  
**(AQW 18748/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Sewage overflow incidents are operational matters for NI Water and any associated risks, and consequences, are for it, and its environmental regulators, to mitigate against and address. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is responsible for protecting public health and the environment by providing effective and efficient regulation and enforcement of water supplies. Responsibility for the regulation of discharges from the Larne Sewage Network falls under the remit of the NIEA. A number of measures including legislative requirements, have been put in place by both NI Water and NIEA to mitigate risks associated with sewage overflows in the Larne area

NI Water has advised that sewer networks have a finite capacity and are designed to overflow to relieve pressure on the system. The overflow is released through safety valves or Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) which flow into the receiving freshwater or marine environment. The CSOs operate on a sewer network during periods of storm/ extreme wet weather and bring significant dilution in the receiving environment, which minimises the risks to the environment, The CSOs are also to stop the internal flooding of households and businesses with sewage which would present a risk to public health.

The NIEA is responsible, under the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, for protecting the environment from the adverse effects of urban wastewater discharges. I understand that the NIEA is currently engaging with NI Water in relation to a number of improvements required to the sewerage network in the Larne area. These improvements are intended to mitigate any risks to neighbouring bathing and shellfish waters and reduce the impact of sewage spills from the sewer network.

**Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when resurfacing works will be carried out throughout Neillsbrook, Randalstown.  
**(AQW 18781/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Allocations to Divisions are being finalised. Once this is complete, the 2021-22 resurfacing programme for Antrim and Newtownabbey will be finalised and details of schemes will be included in the DfI's Roads Spring report to Antrim and Newtownabbey Council.

**Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when resurfacing works will be carried out on the Ahoghill Road, Randalstown.  
**(AQW 18782/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Allocations to Divisions are being finalised. Once this is complete, the 2021-22 resurfacing programme for Antrim and Newtownabbey will be finalised and details of schemes will be included in the DfI's Roads Spring report to Antrim and Newtownabbey Council.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the funding allocation for 2021-22 for (i) Southern Division; and (ii) rural roads within Southern Division.  
**(AQW 18788/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Whilst the 2021-22 budget for Southern Division has yet to be confirmed, I can advise that a provisional list of schemes is being developed across all programmes for delivery during the 2021-22 financial year. Once finalised, details of schemes will be included in the DfI Roads Spring reports presented to the various Councils prior to general release.

I recognise the historic underinvestment in rural roads and I am committed to building on the success of the £12m allocation I made to a Roads Recovery Fund in the 2020-21 financial year, of which £10m was specifically directed to rural roads. I plan to establish a further Roads Recovery Fund in 2021-22 to continue this important work and help rural communities.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when funding will be allocated to complete resurfacing for (i) Carrivekeeneey Road; and (ii) Cloghogue Heights, Newry.  
**(AQW 18789/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Allocations to Divisions are being finalised. Once this is complete, the Department will develop a works programme for the 2021-22 financial year which will include consideration of the delivery of resurfacing works at Carrivekeeneey Road and Cloghogue Heights.

Unfortunately, works programmes have the potential to be delayed due to legal issues surrounding the award of my Department's new resurfacing contract for the area.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether she has agreed a budget for road maintenance that gives full regard to the health, safety and equality concerns of the deterioration of rural roads and; (ii) how she will address regional imbalance, specifically for roads in West Tyrone.  
**(AQW 18796/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The budget for road maintenance is not distributed solely on a geographical basis but rather is allocated to each of the four Roads Divisions on the basis of need using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity (e.g., resurfacing, patching). Divisions broadly use these indicators when apportioning across council areas and this ensures, as far as practicable, an equitable distribution of funds across the whole of the North, including West Tyrone.

I recognise that there has been historical under-investment in our road network for a significant number of years and that many rural roads are in need of repairs. In response I allocated £10m of my 2020-21 Capital budget to specifically address defects on rural roads.

I remain committed in this new financial year to the continuation of a roads recovery fund to help rural communities. I can assure you my Department is committed to delivering the best possible services with the funds available and our divisional teams are currently finalising their work programmes. Details of our works programmes will be provided in the reports presented by Divisional Roads Managers to the various District Councils at the forthcoming round of spring meetings.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to health and safety concerns of road users, whether she will ensure that the road defects on the Derrybard Road and Greenmount Road, Fintona will be rectified.  
**(AQW 18797/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** You may be aware that some resurfacing work has already taken place during the past year that has greatly improved the running surface on these roads. Both of these roads are inspected on a three monthly cycle and the next scheduled inspections are due in the first week of June. All actionable defects identified during these inspections are recorded and repaired within the timeframes established under the current limited service.

**Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how will she ensure local councils and Translink provide safe bus stops across rural communities to prevent vulnerable people and children from having to stand on a 60mph roadside with no protection, lighting or timetable displayed; and (ii) whether her Department has discussed capital investment options to secure funding needed to improve rural bus stops to the same standard used in urban areas.  
**(AQW 18818/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:**

- (i) When developing new roads or making improvements to existing roads my Department consults with Council, Translink and other stakeholders to make sure that the needs of all road users including the needs of those using public transport are fully integrated into the design. Where appropriate street lighting, footways and bus lay-bys can be incorporated as part of the road improvement.

When there is an opportunity to deploy new shelters or if Translink receive requests from passengers or local representatives, they will assess the passenger usage along with a number of other factors including the usage from vulnerable passengers and this information will help inform if the stop should be upgraded to a shelter with lighting. They will then work with the local stakeholders to provide the shelter and manage the maintenance of them. Translink also remains open to working with, and to receive requests from, local communities to improve bus stops/shelters where possible.

- (ii) My Department works closely with Translink on capital planning and securing capital funding for bus shelters across the North. This year, I have provided funding of £321,000 to Translink for the refurbishment and erection of new bus shelters. In addition, funding is also available within the 'Local Transport and Safety Measures' budget to improve rural bus stops, where a need has been identified by Translink in conjunction with local communities.

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the establishment of an Infrastructure Commission for Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18830/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I established a Ministerial Advisory Panel on Infrastructure in August 2020 to consider how an Infrastructure Commission for Northern Ireland might support more effectively the long term planning and development of relevant infrastructure here. The Panel presented a report on their findings to me on 2 October 2020.

I have shared the report with Executive colleagues; the Infrastructure Committee and the Speaker. I have also published the report on my Department's website.

I am continuing to engage with Executive colleagues and am pleased to have received confirmation of support from a majority of Ministers. Looking at the demonstrable success of Infrastructure Commissions around the world, a Commission in Northern Ireland has a critical role to play in our economic recovery from Covid, in the face of Brexit and if we are to deliver on ambitious net zero targets. I therefore continue to work with all Executive colleagues to find consensus on how we might best move forward.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the total amount of money spent from the Blue/Green Fund in 2021/22, broken down per project.

**(AQW 18862/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am currently finalising my budget allocations, however, I have made it clear that I intend to invest in a Blue/Green Infrastructure fund for this year. My Department is currently finalising a full delivery programme.

You have asked what has been spent to date within 21/22 and I can confirm that my Department has, so far, made binding Blue Green Fund grant and contractual commitments amounting to £1.9 million for the following projects in 2021/22:

Forth Meadow Community Greenway	£450,000
Lagan Gateway Greenway	£550,000
Strabane North Greenway	£470,000
Strathfoyle Greenway	£150,000
Strangford Ferry emissions reduction	£300,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>£1,920,000</b>

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure why a combined footway and cycleway is proposed as part of the A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass as opposed to segregated cycle paths.

**(AQW 18863/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I recently announced my decision to proceed with the Enniskillen Southern Bypass scheme and make the statutory Orders. I have made clear my commitment to making road improvements to tackle regional imbalance, improving the economy, job prospects and prosperity, connecting communities and improving road safety. To complement the bypass, provision for active travel has been incorporated into the scheme with 3.4km of new footway/cycleway to be constructed as part of the scheme.

The scheme design assessed the need for a footway/cycleway along the Bypass and identified a shared facility as a suitable provision. As part of my decision to proceed with the scheme, my Department will be looking at further opportunities to maximise the footway/cycleway provision including separation from the carriageway within the vesting line of the Bypass.

In parallel with this work my Department will also be exploring further opportunities to improve the town centre to create a sustainable, liveable place where people have the space to stay, meet, shop and safely walk, wheel and cycle. This will include opportunities for active and sustainable travel in the town.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to create a cycle path from Groomsport to Donaghadee.

**(AQW 18875/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** In order to promote walking and cycling infrastructure, my Department is currently working with Ards and North Down Borough Council to develop a series of greenways within the Ards and North Down area; this includes a link between Groomsport to Donaghadee.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on ESB efforts to receive match funding to upgrade the charge point network.

**(AQW 18879/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The British Government has announced that it is bringing forward its plans to ban sales of new diesel and petrol vehicles in the UK to 2030. My Department is engaging with the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) which is currently carrying out extensive stakeholder engagement across the UK about meeting this challenge. 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. Funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure in Great Britain and in Northern Ireland are provided by OZEV.

I recently met with ESB to identify further opportunities to advance the e-charging network in order to help tackle the climate crisis. My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure and will continue to liaise with ESB to ensure the public network can meet the needs of EV owners now and in the future.

I am committed to supporting the transition to electric vehicles as part of wider transport decarbonisation work and 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 Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the percentage of her total budget that was allocated for cycling infrastructure in 2020-2021.

**(AQW 18880/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department had an opening capital budget of £558m in 2020-21; of which £300m was required to cover contractual commitments and Executive Flagship schemes.

There was an allocation of £6m specifically for cycling and supporting greenway initiatives in the opening budget for 2020-21; which represents 2.3% of the budget that was available for allocation and is an increase on the previous year.

In addition there are activities within structural maintenance and road schemes that benefit cyclists however this cannot be separately identified.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will commit to only pursuing segregated cycle lanes to future proof the cycling network with best practice.

**(AQW 18881/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am fully committed to delivering sustainable infrastructure that transform our communities and people's lives and that includes the provision of good infrastructure that will make walking, wheeling and cycling more attractive to everyone.

My Department strives to provide separated space for walking and cycling, as well as effective separation from motor traffic. As highlighted in my previous answer (AQW 17920/17-22), my Department prioritises the use of the most up-to-date best practice, currently being Local Transport Note (LTN) 1/20, Cycling Infrastructure Design, which was published by the Department for Transport in July 2020.

However, the guidance indicates that shared space may be appropriate where pedestrian numbers are very low and these are the locations where we will consider such provision. It is crucial that we maximise opportunities for cycling infrastructure for communities across the north as much as possible, even with shared infrastructure where segregated isn't possible.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 16337/17-22, why no assessment was carried out for an independent public transport regulatory body for buses.

**(AQW 18882/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As outlined within the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, most public passenger transport services, including bus services, are delivered within Northern Ireland by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC), an Arm's Length Body of my Department.

By having a public sector body delivering public transport bus services, there is a high level of regulation over NITHC given the legal and contractual relationship between my Department and NITHC. This position was supported in the Northern

Ireland Audit Office report into the Effectiveness of Public Transport in Northern Ireland. Within that same report, it outlines that the then Department for Regional Development (DRD) did not bring forward an independent regulatory body for public transport on the basis that a contract was being developed with NITHC for the provision of public transport. This contract was subsequently put in place between the then DRD and NITHC in October 2015 and continues to be managed by my Department.

Within the NIAO report, it outlines that DRD put in place the structures “in light of prevailing budget restraint and in the interests of cost effectiveness in delivering the public transport reform programmes.” As you will be aware, my Department faces a difficult budgetary position given the impact of COVID-19 for the year ahead and, given the already regulated nature of the bus sector, resources would not currently permit an assessment of an independent public transport regulatory body for buses.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the latest traffic volumes that have been recorded on sections of the A5, to detail (i) the precise location of each survey point; (ii) the date that the survey was conducted; and (iii) the volume of traffic detected.

**(AQW 18888/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The table below provides details of the latest traffic volumes that have been recorded on the A5, together with survey dates and locations:

Traffic Site Location	Date Range	Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT)
A5 GNR at Enterprise Centre (Opposite Brookmount Junction)	28 Sep - 4 Oct 2020	15,907
A5 Beltany road at Tully Bog	28 Sep - 9 Oct. 2020	5,947
A5 Beltany Road, Omagh. (Fairy Water Bridge)	24 Mar - 13 Apr 2021	11,700
A5 Beltany Road, Omagh.(site of old factory)	24 Mar - 13 Apr 2021	10,936

It is worth noting that the results from these surveys will have been impacted by COVID-19 restrictions and therefore are unlikely to be representative of actual traffic volumes anticipated to be using the road in the future in the post-pandemic period.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment of the effectiveness of the pop-up cycle lane on Dublin Road, Belfast; and (ii) where else in the city centre area she regards as priority for a similar intervention.

**(AQW 18915/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My vision is to deliver sustainable infrastructure that transforms our communities and lives, and as part of this, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Department installed a series of pop-up cycle lanes in Belfast, including on the Dublin Road, Bankmore Street, Hardcastle Street and Marcus Ward Street.

As these are pilot schemes, my Departments has been monitoring the cycle lanes on an ongoing basis and making adjustments as necessary.

A review is currently being carried out on a number of pop-up cycle lanes, including the Dublin Road, and the outcome of this will be determine the effectiveness, lessons learnt and how additional cycling infrastructure can be rolled out in the future.

**Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the report on the Belfast Cycling Network, due for publication after Easter 2021.

**(AQW 18918/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The Belfast Cycling Network aims to set out how we will develop connected, continuous and coherent cycling infrastructure across Belfast over the next ten years. My Department is currently preparing the document for publication and I am planning to publish it within the next few weeks.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether her Department provides guidance to local councils on Tree Preservation Orders, including guidance in relation to the Planning Act 2011; and (ii) what type of evaluation or assessment method is used.

**(AQW 18929/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:**

- (i) The Department responds to ad hoc queries from councils in relation to the legislation, regarding Tree Preservation Orders, in the Planning Act (NI) 2011. While the Department has not published any formal guidance, for local councils, councils may avail of guidance in other jurisdictions where similar provisions apply. Each council can, of course, produce its own guidance in relation to Tree Preservation Orders. In addition, the legislation in the Planning Act is based on the previous legislation i.e. the Planning (NI) Order 1991. Guidance regarding the Planning Order is still available on the Department's website [Tree Preservation Orders - A Guide to Protecting Trees (infrastructure-ni.gov.uk)].

- (ii) Councils and the Department, have professional planning officers working for them who can offer planning advice, particularly on the interpretation of planning law e.g. on whether particular trees merit protection via a Tree Preservation Order. Councils also have dedicated tree officers to provide appropriate advice and guidance. Consideration will be given as to whether it is expedient in the interests of amenity to apply a Tree Preservation Order to protect trees or woodlands which may be under threat. This will include a visual consideration of the trees and their contribution to the local environment, as well as an assessment of their condition.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department will ensure that walkers and cyclists on the Clondeboye Way, as part of the Ulster Way network, can safely cross the A2 Bangor to Belfast Road.

**(AQW 18932/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Clondeboye Way is a stretch of the Ulster Way that is remote from the road and does not form part of the adopted network. Due to its rough terrain it would not be considered accessible for all users and an alternative option for walkers and cyclists exists alongside the A2 at this location which stretches between Bangor and Ballyrobert. Given the limited usage of this crossing point, my Department has no plans at this time to implement a formal crossing point.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how long the review into the Northern Ireland rail network will be open; and (ii) where should submissions to the review be sent.

**(AQW 18943/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:**

- (i) The procurement process to appoint a service provider to undertake the All Island Strategic Rail Review was launched in April 21 and it is expected that selection of the successful tenderer will be announced in July, with the Review to commence thereafter. While the ultimate duration of the review will be determined by the work programmes submitted by tenderers, it is a requirement of the published request for tender that the work take no longer than 12 months in total.
- (ii) As part of the request for tender, there is a stipulation that the service provider must undertake a public engagement exercise. The successful tenderer will provide an open invitation to all interested parties to make a submission and participate in the public engagement phase of the study. The details on this exercise will be considered through the procurement process and, once a preferred bidder has been selected, both Departments will seek to commission this phase of the study and will publish details in due course.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much extra money her Department has requested from the Department of Finance for repairs to roads.

**(AQW 18944/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As outlined in my response to your previous AQW (AQW 15004/17-22) I made Monitoring Round bids totalling £17.5m for road maintenance during the 2020-21 financial year and was only allocated £2m.

To try to enhance funding for our roads, I was able to re-allocate £4.5m within my Departments budgets in January to supplement available funding for road repairs. Draft outturns for my Department are indicating expenditure of £100m on structural maintenance of the road network.

For the current financial year, as part of the Budget information gathering exercises, I had presented additional bids for funding in 2021-22 for priority areas of work including road repairs. DfI budget allocations are being finalised. I will also continue to use in year monitoring rounds to consider opportunities to bid for additional funding, as part of my continued commitment to doing the basics well and achieving regional balance.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many homes have been developed on side roads accessed from Killyglen Link, Larne; and (ii) who must use Killyglen Link to access the gritted road network.

**(AQW 18952/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department does not hold the information requested on how many homes have been developed on side roads accessed from Killyglen Link, Larne, nor do we hold details of who must use this road to access the gritted network.

My officials advise it is their intention to update the traffic count on the Killyglen Link Road during the early part of the next winter season which will form part of a re-assessment of this route for potential inclusion onto the gritted network. I have asked my officials to advise you of the outcome once the review has been completed.

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether any foreign companies currently trading in Northern Ireland, under her departmental portfolio, have access to the Investor Court System or the Investor-State Dispute Settlement.

**(AQW 18982/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** None of the publicly owned companies that I have governance responsibility for are foreign companies or businesses.

My Department currently holds contracts with two non-UK companies. However, it is not known, at this time, whether either of these companies have access to the Investor Court System or the Investor-State Dispute Settlement.

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 13544/17-22, whether she will include Foyle in the feasibility study to pilot suicide prevention infrastructure on her Department's property.

**(AQW 19004/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The feasibility study being undertaken relates to the recommendations arising from the recent 'Relink the Westlink' project. As this project considered the specific infrastructure along the M2/Westlink corridor it would be inappropriate to transfer its specific recommendations to another location.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the process taken during the appointment of Harbour Commissioners.

**(AQW 19010/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am responsible for the appointment of the Chair and Non-Executive Board Members (Commissioners) to three trust ports.

All of my Department's public appointments are regulated by the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland (CPANI).

I can advise that Harbour Commissioner appointments are made in line with the relevant Harbour Order legislation and follow the process as detailed in the CPANI Code of Practice for Ministerial appointments in Northern Ireland. All of my Departments public appointments are made through open public competition. For your reference I provide a link to the Code of Practice on the CPANI website ([https://www.publicappointmentsni.org/sites/cpani/files/media-files/CPANI\\_Code\\_of\\_Practice\\_JL2\\_December\\_2016.pdf](https://www.publicappointmentsni.org/sites/cpani/files/media-files/CPANI_Code_of_Practice_JL2_December_2016.pdf)).

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the pass rates of driving tests compared to pre-COVID-19 levels.

**(AQW 19014/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The table below details the pass rates for practical driving tests conducted in 2020-21 compared to pre-COVID levels in 2019-20. These have been split by high-level test category.

	Private Car	Motor-cycle	LGV	PCV	Taxi	Other	Overall
2019-20	54.6	73.6	75.3	73.4	64.5	81.1	57.9
2020-21	65.4	71.4	78.0	67.3	-	92.4	68.1

#### Notes

- 1 Due to Covid-19 restrictions driving tests conducted in 2020-21 are significantly lower than for previous 'normal' years. As pass-rates are derived from tests conducted, this is an important consideration when drawing comparison with 2019-20 figures.
- 2 Pass-rates are calculated using conducted tests only; those where the customer failed to attend are excluded.
- 3 A '-' symbol in the table indicates that the pass-rate has been suppressed due to a low number of conducted tests.

These statistics form part of the Departments quarterly National Statistics publication, available on our website: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/articles/driver-vehicle-agency-activity-statistics>

The quarter four edition, covering January to March 2021 and including final statistics for the 2020-21 financial year, was published on Wednesday 26 May.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of reports that NI Water supplied water that was unfit for human consumption in the Newry area.

**(AQW 19023/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am aware that, following an investigation by the Drinking Water Inspectorate, NI Water is being prosecuted for a water quality event relating to a localised taste and odour issue with water supplied to 43 homes in the Meigh area of Newry in 2018. NI Water has acknowledged that customers in the area were inconvenienced during the incident, and that the water supplied was not up to the expected standards. The case was listed for first mention in Newry Magistrates Court on 17th May 2021, and has been adjourned until the 19th July 2021.

NI Water has established procedures to ensure that, if a failure occurs, its staff can immediately react to protect the public and the environment. In this case, NI Water has advised me that it reacted quickly at the time of the incident by carrying out sampling and analysis of the water from customers' taps, issuing 'Do Not Use Tap Water for Drinking or Cooking' notices to affected properties, and providing temporary supplies of bottled water. I have been further advised that NI Water maintained a continuous line of communication with customers and visited the community, as well as updating elected representatives on the situation.

NI Water has a pre-emptive system of robust testing and sampling which sees over 120,000 samples lifted and analysed each year. This system of monitoring provides an early warning to highlight any issues that might be unfolding with drinking water quality. In recent years, NI Water has recorded its highest ever quality of drinking water, with an average of 99.9%.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the involvement her Department has had in the development and maintenance of Forest Crescent, Drumlegagh.  
**(AQW 19049/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The roads and footways at Forest Crescent, Drumlegagh have not been adopted and consequently are not maintained by my Department. However, during the reorganisation of local government in 1973, responsibility for the street lighting in the development transferred from the council to my Department in and continues to be maintained by Western Division's street lighting team.

Un-adopted roads can be adopted into the maintained road network under Article 9 of the Private Streets Order where they satisfy the following criteria:

- a) the majority of landowners or occupiers of the land in or adjoining the street consent and request in writing that the street should become a public road;
- b) the Department is satisfied that the street in all respects is fit and proper to become a public road and that the majority of the frontage of the road is developed; and
- c) that any plans to bring the street up to the standard suitable for adoption be subject to an application through Planning Service, noting that the cost of any such application and improvement works needs to be borne by the frontagers.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department has advertised the Planning Engagement Partnership event to be held on 25 May 2021.  
**(AQW 19071/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** This event has been advertised through a press release issued on Monday 17th May to all news outlets across Northern Ireland, broadcast and print. Information has been posted on the Department's website. The event has also been advertised through social media during the week commencing 17th May, via Facebook and Twitter.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her Department's assessment of the impact of the Taxi Accessibility Regulations (NI) 2015 on the availability of wheelchair accessible vehicles in Northern Ireland; and (ii) what her Department is doing to increase the availability of wheelchair accessible vehicles.  
**(AQW 19075/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The number of wheelchair accessible vehicles (WATs) licensed as Class B taxis, ultimately depends on drivers and operators purchasing and using them, but as policy maker and regulator, clearly the actions my Department takes can have an impact on the market.

Since May 2016 the Department has been monitoring the number of WATs throughout Northern Ireland and routinely publishes quarterly statistical reports, with the latest figures for the quarter ending 31 December 2021 confirming there were a total of 506 taxi vehicles licensed in Class B which is a slight drop from 534 in 2013 which predates the Taxi Accessibility Regulations (NI) 2015.

To make it easier for taxi drivers and operators to get WATs, the DVA has reviewed the process and guidance available to prospective buyers of WATs, and for those companies that supply and modify the vehicles.

In addition, to ensure that operators remain fully compliant with laws around disabilities, officials have previously met with the Consumer Council, the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Committee (IMTAC) and the Equality Commission. The discussions were positive and have led to direct contact between the Commission and the three largest taxi operators in NI.

My officials continue to monitor the number of WATs on a quarterly basis and will continue to engage with stakeholders to keep apprised of developments.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan will include measures to promote the decarbonisation of transport in NI.  
**(AQW 19076/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am committed to tackling the climate emergency and doing all that we can, as quickly as we can, to reduce our emissions. In that regard, I have recently invested £50m in 100 zero emission double deck vehicles for our bus network. These buses will be delivered by spring 2022 and will be made up of 20 hydrogen and 80 battery electric vehicles. This is in addition to the three zero emission hydrogen buses that recently went into service within the Belfast Metro network.

In addition, Translink has a strategic vision to see fully zero emission bus services in Belfast and Derry by 2030, and the whole public transport network to be net zero emission by 2040. They are undertaking an in-depth feasibility study to investigate options for decarbonising the public transport network including the rail network. These studies will consider options for electrification, hydrogen or indeed a combination of both.



My officials are currently developing a new suite of transport plans, and the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) is the first in line for completion. It will set out future investment for our strategic transport networks, by road, rail and bus, as well as active travel.

Officials are continuing to make progress and I intend to publish the draft RSTNTP for public consultation in late 2021, with a view to issuing the finalised Plan in spring 2022. The public consultation on the RSTNTP will provide an opportunity for representations to be made on future investment in cleaner transport.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the current circumstances whereby private coach operators can be fined for the consumption of alcohol on board their vehicles, yet have no power to search passengers.  
**(AQW 19089/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The offence of consuming alcohol on a bus is committed only by the person consuming the alcohol. The bus operator commits no offence. Enforcement of the ban on consumption of alcohol on board a bus is the responsibility of the PSNI.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will consider the use of drainage nets to capture plastics on NI Water drainage systems.  
**(AQW 19116/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** NI Water has advised me that it uses a number of methods within its foul and combined sewer network to ensure that solids, including plastics, are not released into the environment. The primary method for removal of solids (including plastics) is via powered screens at the inlets to wastewater treatment works (WWTW). This meets a requirement by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

Static nets or sack systems, which are equivalent to drainage nets, are in use at some older NI Water sites but are no longer installed at new sites. This is due to the challenges associated with removing and replacing them once they have become full of solid material (including plastics). NI Water has advised that the screens it uses are more effective.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's policy in terms of the Don't Mow, Let it Grow rewilding initiative within the Ards and North Down Borough Council area.  
**(AQW 19144/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department manages vegetation across our network in a number of ways with the primary aim of maintaining road safety while also protecting wildlife and taking care in maintaining their habitats. In this regard my current grass cutting policy seeks to achieve a balance between road safety, the control of noxious weeds and environmental protection.

In recent years my Department has been engaging in a 'Don't Mow Let It Grow' (DMLIG) pilot project in conjunction with Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council, Northern Ireland Environment Agency and others. Through this work, my Department has increased its understanding of the importance of road verges for biodiversity and will now be engaging with other councils, including Ards and North Down Borough Council, to consider how the lessons learned from DMLIG might be integrated into other transport corridors.

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, my Department is committed to reviewing its environmental policies to promote pollinator-friendly practices and to encourage their inclusion on road schemes, where practicable.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration has been given to providing traffic lights at the top of the Trooperslane road, Greenisland to promote free flowing traffic once the park and ride facility has been completed.  
**(AQW 19172/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I can confirm that as part of the planning process, consultants engaged by Translink were required to assess the impact of the proposed park & ride facility on the existing road network.

I am advised that the assessment submitted, which was reviewed by my officials as part of the planning process, concluded that the junction of Trooperslane Road/Upper Road had sufficient reserve capacity and did not require any traffic signals or upgrading.

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what planning regulations are in place in regards providing Air bnb in an existing domestic property or building a domestic property for the purpose of providing Airbnb.  
**(AQW 19176/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** There are no specific planning regulations in place relating to Airbnb in an existing domestic property. Planning permission may be required to use a house, apartment, student accommodation or other premises for a short-term holiday let, such as Airbnb. The need for planning permission will depend on the extent to which the short-term holiday let changes the use and character of the property and the degree to which it impacts on its surroundings.

Planning applications seeking the change of use of an existing building or for a new build to provide Airbnb or self-contained holiday accommodation will normally be determined by the relevant local council planning authority. Each application will be assessed on its individual merits, having regard to the local development plan, regional planning policy (including the tourism policies in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) and retained Planning Policy Statement 16: Tourism), local circumstances and all other material considerations. The relevance and weight to be given to all material considerations is a matter for the council to decide.

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider the inclusion of St Mary's Primary School, Comber in the next tranche of 20mph part-time speed limits at schools.

**(AQW 19179/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** As you will be aware St Mary's Primary School is accessed directly from the A21 Belfast Road Roundabout and therefore the provision of a part-time 20mph speed limit may be problematic at this location. I am advised that problems being experienced in the vicinity of this access may be assisted by alternative access arrangements and I have asked officials to explore this further with the school.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 18928/17-22, to detail (i) what the consultation with the appropriate council consists of, as outlined in Section 124 of the Planning Act 2011; (ii) whether any other person is consulted or notified before the Tree Preservation Order is revoked; and (iii) how, and to whom, her Department communicates that a Tree Preservation Order has been revoked.

**(AQW 19196/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:**

- (i) It is considered appropriate under Section 124 of the Planning Act 2011 that consultation with the council would consist of written correspondence.
- (ii) Consultation under Section 124 of the legislation is only required to take place with the council.
- (iii) As the local planning authority, the council is best placed to carry out the actions required to communicate that a Tree Preservation Order has been revoked i.e.:
  - give notice to those affected by the revocation order [regulation 8(1)(b) of the The Planning (Trees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015]; and
  - remove the copy of the original Tree Preservation Order made available for public inspection [regulation 8(1)(c)]; and
  - amend the planning register [Section 242(1)(l) (Planning register) of the Planning Act]; and the register of statutory charges [Section 245 (Registration of matters in Statutory Charges Register) of the Planning Act].

Therefore, the Department may choose to ask the council to carry out these actions. In any event, these actions would be carried out to ensure those affected by the revocation order are aware that it has taken effect.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether, under Section 122(1) of the Planning Act 2011, there is an agreed, or statutory, definition of the interests of amenity for the provision for the preservation of trees and woodlands for use by local councils.

**(AQW 19197/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The term "interests of amenity" is used in section 122(1) of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 however, it is not defined. Councils therefore need to exercise judgement when deciding whether it is in their power to make a Tree Preservation Order.

In planning terms, it is generally accepted that "amenity" relates to the qualities, characteristics and attributes people value about a place and which contribute to their quality of life. Therefore, the protection of trees, via a Tree Preservation Order under section 122(1), is justified where the loss of the trees would have a significant negative impact on the local environment and its enjoyment by the public.

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department is assessing how to improve road safety on Newry Road, between Silverbridge and Crossmaglen.

**(AQW 19200/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department recognises the importance of road safety measures and is committed to exploring solutions that deliver better for communities and improve lives across the North. If you have concerns about any specific locations along this road, please advise my officials who will arrange to give any locations identified careful consideration.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will increase efforts to keep planning applications processed in a timely manner, in line with legislation, for projects related to decarbonisation.

**(AQW 19223/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department is working closely with key stakeholders in a number of ways to improve processes and increase the efficiency of the planning system to ensure that applications are processed in a timely manner and in line with legislation.

A review of the implementation of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 is underway which will provide an opportunity to consider any improvements which may be required to the way in which the Planning Act has been commenced and implemented in subordinate legislation. Work is also ongoing with statutory consultees through a cross government Planning Forum to improve processes around statutory consultation. In addition, my Department, as part of a collaborative project with 10 councils, will be delivering a new Planning IT system next year which will improve the submission and processing of planning applications.

The improvements delivered from this work will benefit planning applications promoting the key principles of sustainable development, including projects related to decarbonisation.

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will improve the communication and awareness between the DVA and customers that theory test 'placeholder appointments' are not bookings.

**(AQW 19225/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** All theory test appointments, from 26 December 2020 up to and including 22 April 2021, were rescheduled following the Executive's decision to increase lockdown restrictions to help stop the spread of Covid-19.

Rather than cancel tests, they were rescheduled for 60 days later, into a temporary placeholder appointment. Affected customers were emailed to advise them of this together with instructions explaining how to change this to an actual appointment. However, not all customers provided email contact details, therefore a small number would not have received this information. The Driver and Vehicle Agency is working with the theory test provider to identify and contact these customers by other communication methods such as text message or post, and additional information has been included on nidirect.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what actions are being taken to assess the cost of electrifying (i) the Belfast to Newry rail service; (ii) the Belfast to Bangor rail service; (iii) the Belfast to Larne rail service; (iv) the Belfast to Londonderry rail service; and (v) the Coleraine to Portrush rail service.

**(AQW 19241/17-22)**

**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. I also 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 the all-island economy, improving the ability of people to connect with and access opportunities and addressing regional imbalance.

I can confirm that an initial technical study has recently been commissioned within Translink to determine the impact of electrification on the existing infrastructure assets e.g. bridges, station canopies, signalling equipment etc. The study will estimate the capital costs to electrify the network including the associated annual operating costs and delivery of the programme. In addition, 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 and builds on 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 the decarbonisation of our rail network across the island of Ireland.

Following the completion of the study being undertaken by Translink and the All Island

Strategic Rail Review, a base of evidence will be in place to assist on determining how to take forward decarbonisation of the NIR rail network.

**Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will prioritise the delivery of a puffin crossing on Whiterock Road, in the vicinity of Britton's Parade.

**(AQW 19258/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Following an earlier request for the provision of a pedestrian crossing facility on Whiterock Road in the vicinity of Britton's Parade, my officials carried out a detailed assessment of this location which indicated it was highly placed on the prioritised list of pedestrian crossing requests in the Belfast area.

I am very keen to support proposals that better develop active travel routes and have asked my officials to explore the potential provision of this crossing from within available funding.

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action is her Department is taking to prevent the repeated severe flooding on the Portadown Road, Lurgan, adjacent to the Gilpinstown Road junction.

**(AQW 19259/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I can confirm that my officials are aware of the drainage issue on the Portadown Road, Lurgan adjacent to the junction of the Gilpinstown Road.

Initial investigations indicate there may be a partial blockage of the drainage system with localised flooding occurring during periods of intense rainfall although this gradually disperses due to the system still being partially operational.

Further investigatory work and has been commissioned to fully diagnose the problem, after which remedial works will be undertaken that are expected to be completed over the summer months.

**Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail at what point, under legislation, in a planning application should a bat survey be carried out if required.

**(AQW 19275/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** In order to comply with the Conservation (Natural Habitats etc) Regulations (NI) 1995 (as amended) a planning authority must ensure that it has adequately considered any potential impacts on bats from a development proposal. Case law has established that impacts on European protected species such as bats, must be adequately considered before planning approval is granted. Therefore, all necessary ecological surveys should be carried out before planning approval is granted.

The Habitats Regulations do not specify the point, in a planning application, when a bat survey should be carried out. If one is required, it should ideally be carried out before an application is submitted, or as soon as the need has been identified and at the appropriate time for bat surveys. It will then be a material consideration in the planning authority's determination of the application.

DAERA advice on the matter is to use the NI Biodiversity checklist to determine if a survey is needed and, if so, it should accompany any planning application. Failure to submit a bat survey, where one is required, will result in a delay in determining the application and may ultimately result in the refusal of the application.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 18582/17-22, (i) which body was responsible for ensuring the orderly transfer of historic minerals planning files to local councils; (ii) what inventories exist of the files transferred; and (iii) why, after six years since Local Government Reform, some local councils are directing citizens to her Department when requests are made to view these historic permissions.

**(AQW 19368/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:**

- (i) The Department of the Environment was the prevailing department at the time of local government reform in April 2015.
- (ii) The Department retained a number of live files at the time of transfer along with associated history files. Those files not retained by the Department were subsequently transferred to the local councils and the member may wish to consult the relevant council/s to seek an inventory of the files they received from the Department.
- (iii) The member may wish to seek a response to this from the relevant local council/s.

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the compilation of the feasibility study for Phase 3 Derry-Londonderry to Coleraine rail line upgrade.

**(AQW 19373/17-22)**

**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 Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 16249/17-22, when will she confirm a works programme for North Down for 2021/22.

**(AQW 19374/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Allocations to Divisions are being finalised. Once this is complete, the Department will develop a works programme for the 2021-22 financial year for the Ards and North Down Council area.

**Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's work on delivering on all-island infrastructure.

**(AQO 2082/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I have had constructive discussions with the Taoiseach and the Irish Transport Minister, Minister Ryan T.D., 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 the Narrow Water Bridge.

Last month I was delighted to announce, with Transport Minister, Eamon Ryan TD, 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, Cork and Limerick, 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 remain committed to advancing the Narrow Water Bridge Project, and I am continuing to engage with Minister Ryan to consider how best to ensure the multiple benefits from a bridge can be realised.

I am very pleased that my Department was able to support the Special EU Programmes Body issuing a Letter of Offer to the consortium led by Waterways Ireland for €4.9m, from the INTERREG VA Territorial Co-operation Programme, to complete the Ulster Canal Greenway by December 2021.

My Department also fulfils the Accountable Department role in relation to the three cross border greenways funded through the INTERRG VA Programme by the Special EU Programmes Body. The three greenways are the Ulster Canal Greenway, the North-West Greenway and the Carlingford Lough Greenway. I am pleased that my Department has been able to support the issuing of Letters of Offer.

I can assure you that I am fully committed to continuing to work closely with my Irish counterparts to ensure delivery for all our citizens across this island.

**Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the A32 Omagh to Enniskillen Road scheme.  
**(AQO 2086/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** A route improvement strategy for the A32 Omagh to Enniskillen was developed several years ago as part of the transfer of acute hospital services away from Omagh to Enniskillen which identified a number of improvement schemes. My Department has delivered two schemes along this route: an on-line improvement at Drumskinny; and an off-line realignment at Shannaragh. Of the remaining schemes that were identified, the proposed off-line realignment at Cornamuck is my next priority along this route. Design and development work, together with the necessary statutory processes are now complete on this scheme.

My Department has also progressed another proposed scheme at Kilgortnaleague that has been developed to the Preferred Route stage. I recognise the importance of investment in our roads infrastructure, including the A32, to address regional imbalance, improve safety and to connect communities.

I am committed to the delivery of improvements to the A32 Omagh-Enniskillen route and will work with the Finance Minister and my Executive colleagues to secure the necessary funding as quickly as possible, but that will be dependent on the outcome of future spending reviews and other capital funding priorities.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's commitments in New Decade, New Approach.  
**(AQO 2088/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** The commitments made in 'New Decade, New Approach' will be transformational and I am committed to doing all that I can to deliver on them. My Department is progressing Executive Flagship projects on the A5 and A6 along with other key infrastructure projects including the A1 Junctions safety programme, the iconic Narrow Water Bridge and York Street Interchange. Work is also progressing to develop the design of the Newry Southern Relief Road and other statutory requirements in advance of public consultation.

New Decade, New Approach also recognises that significant investment in our wastewater systems, including upgrading our sewers, pumping stations and wastewater treatment works. Progressing action on this, my officials are currently preparing a consultation report on the responses received to the public consultation on 'Living With Water in Belfast' which closed on 29 January 2021.

Collaboration across our islands is absolutely key to ensuring delivery of the commitments in NDNA as the agreement also contains pledges from both the Irish and British Governments. I have met and had useful discussions with the Irish Transport Minister, Minister Ryan, to discuss how we can work in partnership to progress these shared commitments to improve the lives of all of our citizens who share this island.

In line with the commitments within the New Decade, New Approach, in April 2021, I and Minister Ryan, were 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 currently working together to progress the review, and, in addition, my plan is to put the strategic transport plan out for public consultation this year.

I have also met with Minister Robin Walker to discuss the necessity for the British Government to honour its commitments which underpin New Decade, New Approach. I have also had a positive, helpful conversation with the Secretary of State for Transport and our Finance Minister to discuss the issues we face here and seek reassurance as to the priority of investment in our critical infrastructure.

Working in partnership within the Executive and across these islands, I am determined to see progress on delivery of the commitments within New Decade, New Approach, to ensure that we can improve lives and opportunities for all our communities.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Roads Recovery Fund.  
**(AQO 2089/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I recognise that there has been historical under-investment in our road network for a significant number of years and that many rural roads are in need of repairs. In response, I allocated £12m of my 2020-21 Capital budget to a Roads Recovery Fund, of which £10m was specifically directed 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 750 locations on the rural road network will have benefitted from this funding.

I am currently considering my capital allocations for 2021-22, however, I remain committed to setting up a further Roads Recovery Fund from the available 2021-22 Budget to continue delivering this important work to improve connectivity and help rural communities.

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the rollout of LED street lighting.  
**(AQO 2087/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Out of a total stock of just under 290,000 street lights, approximately 112,000 (39%) street lights have been changed to more energy efficient LED units by my Department.

Since the commencement of this programme in 2015, a significant reduction in energy consumption of 24 Giga-Watt Hours or 24% has been achieved. This programme has also delivered savings in maintenance costs due to the much longer operating life of LED's as well as providing environmental benefits.

I am committed to achieving further reductions in energy use and I am pleased to inform the Member that it is my intention to make further allocations towards LED retrofitting in 2021/22.

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what budget exists for the A5 upgrade in the financial year 2021-2022.  
**(AQO 2085/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** I am fully committed to the delivery of the A5 Western Transport Corridor flagship project, which I acutely recognise is of significant strategic importance to the North West region and wider island, helping to tackle regional imbalance, improving the economy, job prospects and prosperity, connecting communities and improving road safety.

Funding for the A5 forms part of my consideration of Capital Budget allocations for 2021-22. I will however be allocating sufficient funding to allow work to progress at pace to move towards the publication of a new Environmental Statement Addendum this autumn, with a view to a reconvened public inquiry next year.

**Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the criteria used by her Department to determine the bond required by a developer prior to commencing a private housing development.  
**(AQO 2084/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** My Department manages the adoption of roads in new developments under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980 and this requires developers to enter into an Agreement and bond with my Department before commencing development. When a bond is requested by a developer my Department will calculate the value of the road bond using a range of construction rates and quantities to reflect the cost to my Department of constructing the road, footway, road drainage and street lighting systems to a standard suitable for adoption. Similar arrangements are in place with Northern Ireland Water (NIW) to cover infrastructure that they will maintain on satisfactory completion of all works.

I fully appreciate the value for property owners of developers entering into Agreements and bonds with my Department as they provide an important mechanism that ensures the delivery of appropriate infrastructure in developments should developers fail to meet their obligations.

I am fully committed to ensuring that homeowners in new developments are not left with incomplete roads and my Department is presently undertaking a fresh exercise to review the construction rates used to calculate road bonds to ensure they reflect the full cost of constructing roads in new developments. This review will involve local stakeholders in the construction industry, as well as surety providers.

**Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the frequency of road surface maintenance inspections for each class of road.  
**(AQO 2083/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Article 8 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 places a duty on my Department to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition. In recognition of its duty of care, my Department has put in place a set of Maintenance Standards for Safety, which are designed to ensure a consistent service level across the network and safe highways for all road users.

Essentially, my Department utilises a system of regular inspections of the road network. Inspection frequencies reflect traffic volumes and range between daily cycles for motorways to six monthly inspection cycles for carriageways carrying low volumes of traffic. Within that range higher trafficked roads are inspected on a monthly basis with medium trafficked roads on a 3 monthly cycle.

Under my Department's Maintenance Standards for Safety, defects are prioritised for repair according to their severity. The urgency of repair is determined from a number of factors, including the depth of the defect, volume of traffic and the location of the defect in terms of carriageway width.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the current average waiting time for a driving test.  
**(AQO 2081/17-22)**

**Ms Mallon:** Following the Executive's decision on 15 April to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place. The reopening of the practical driving test booking service was phased, based on the expiry dates of theory test pass certificates, to give priority to those who have been waiting the longest time. I am pleased to confirm that following this, the booking service for practical driving tests opened for all customers on 10 May 2021, providing everyone with a valid theory test pass certificate with equal opportunity to book a driving test, regardless of their past test history or previous priorities.

The DVA has made additional tests slots available between now and the end of August and bookings for September and October have also been released to accommodate more learners. As of 18 May 2021 approximately 16,000 customers have booked a driving test and circa 4,000 slots remain available to book across the network of test centres. The waiting time to get a test date will vary depending on the chosen centre and, while there is limited availability between now and the end of August, additional slots will become available as new driving examiners continue to be appointed over the coming months, or when tests are cancelled.

Due to the constantly changing position, customers are advised to keep checking the booking system for availability. If slots are not initially available at a customer's preferred test centre, they may wish to consider booking a test at another centre. I remain committed to minimising disruption and ensuring the DVA's plan for the restoration of services is in hand, however, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times and I would ask customers for their continued patience.

## Department of Justice

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department will provide updated guidance for students who are required to travel away from home for access to adequate resources, including wifi, to enable them to complete their course, as to whether this will be deemed as an essential journey.  
**(AQW 13159/17-22)**

**Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice):** Travel guidance is available at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/coronavirus-covid-19/travel-advice-and-guidance>

Where daily cross border travel is required to access education, this is considered essential and does not require self-isolation, however all social distancing measures should be strictly adhered to.

However, where students are travelling between places of residence, such as returning home from university accommodation, they should self-isolate upon their return to Northern Ireland for 10 days.

Students are advised to minimise their movements between their term time residence and permanent residence as far as possible, and where learning is delivered remotely to access this from one location for as long as is feasible.

From 24 May it is not required to self-isolate for 10 days if arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area to visit family or friends, which would include any students returning home for the summer break. However the public health advice is to take a pre-departure Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test, and then a LFD test on day 2 and day 8 post arrival in NI.

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the law governing the use of air rifles.  
**(AQW 18659/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 (the 2004 Order) provides the legislative framework for the control of firearms, including air guns. A firearm certificate is required for an air gun with a kinetic energy in excess of one joule.

Articles 4 – 6 of the 2004 Order set out the application, grant process and conditions on obtaining a firearm certificate and Article 7, as amended, sets out how 16 and 17 year olds are granted a firearm certificate in specified circumstances.

Schedule 1 to the 2004 Order sets out certain exemptions from requiring a firearm certificate and paragraphs 8 and 9, as amended, include exemptions relating to air guns.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's work on legislation concerning animal welfare.  
**(AQW 18694/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** All animal welfare matters, including the creation of offences and penalties in legislation for abuse of animals and their enforcement, are the policy and legislative responsibility of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

You may, however, be interested to know that I recently met with Minister Poots regarding the creation of a register of those banned from owning animals. While any policy decision regarding the creation of a register of those convicted of animal cruelty is purely the responsibility for DAERA, I have agreed that my officials will provide assistance and advice with respect to the management of criminal records in order to assist with this work.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Justice whether she will consider bringing forward legislation to ban clamping vehicles on private property by private firms.

**(AQW 18696/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** My Department previously carried out a public consultation which focused exclusively on identifying the best option for the future regulation of vehicle immobilisation on private land in Northern Ireland. The results of the consultation did not provide sufficient evidence to suggest a need to ban vehicle immobilisation on private land in Northern Ireland. I do not believe there is sufficient justification to reopen this matter and commence a further consultation.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of arrests made and successful prosecutions in relation to drugs offences, for each of the last five years, broken by (i) constituency; and (ii) Police Command Area.

**(AQW 18754/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The Department does not hold the information requested in relation to the number of arrests made in relation to drugs offences. The recording of information on arrests made for drugs offences 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 that part of your question to the PSNI.

The Department does hold information in relation to the number of successful prosecutions for drugs offences in each of the last five years. However, Departmental datasets do not contain information in relation to the location of an offence, so it is not possible to provide information broken down by Assembly Constituency or by Police Command Area. Therefore, information in relation to the numbers of cases in which there was a conviction at court, or an out of court diversionary disposal, in cases where there was a drugs offence, has been provided for the last 5 years in the following table:

**Convictions at courts and out of court diversions for drugs offences, 2015 - 2019**

Year	Convictions/Out of court diversions
2015	3,788
2016	3,632
2017	3,530
2018	3,950
2019	4,314

**Note:**

- 1 Convictions included relate to initial disposal disposals at court. Appeals are not included.
- 2 Out of court diversions included relate to cautions, informed warnings and Youth conference Plans.
- 3 Figures relate to defendants dealt with where at least one of the offences concerned was a drugs offence.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of drugs finds/seizures by the PSNI, broken down by (i) constituency; and (ii) drug type in each of the last four years.

**(AQW 18755/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The Department does not hold the information requested. The recording of information on drugs finds/seizures by the PSNI is a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the prevalence of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder within the justice system.

**(AQW 18801/17-22)**



**Mrs Long:** My Department does not hold information in relation to the prevalence of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) within the justice system in Northern Ireland.

International research suggests that 10.9% - 11.7% of young persons in custody have FASD, compared to 0.1 – 5% of the general population. However, it is widely recognised that a diagnosis of FASD is difficult to make in adolescence, often due to the lack of available history.

While the Youth Justice Agency works with young people who have, or are suspected of having FASD, and provides input on assessments which are led by the Department of Health in relation to the condition, information on prevalence is not recorded on the Agency's database.

In relation to the Northern Ireland Prison Service, healthcare services are provided through the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. Information on all aspects of health, including where there has been a diagnosis of FASD, is held confidentially by the Trust.

**Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Justice to outline what training is available for staff on Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder. (AQW 18802/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** Staff working in the Youth Justice Agency have been able to avail of awareness sessions on Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) delivered by the Health and Social Care Trusts. FASD is also referenced in the mandatory child protection training which staff must undertake every 3 years.

Within the Northern Ireland Prison Service, prison officers receive a comprehensive training programme which includes awareness of trauma informed practice and adverse childhood experiences. Training is provided to officers enable them to respond appropriately to challenging behaviours displayed by people in custody.

Specific training on FASD is not provided to prison officers.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Justice, further to the response to AQW 13436/17-22, has her Department yet engaged with the firearms dealers and other interested parties. (AQW 18837/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** Officials have held initial discussions with a number of relevant partners and stakeholders on a range of issues; feedback provided on firearms dealer holdings did not favour adopting a similar approach to previous engagement on this issue. Officials will continue to engage with key partners to ensure a suitable method for assessing the need for a review is progressed, specifically how best to engage with all registered firearms dealers.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Justice to outline (i) what steps her Department is taking to implement harsher sentencing toward human traffickers; (ii) how many human trafficking prosecutions have taken place in the last decade in Northern Ireland; and (iii) what preventative steps her Department is taking to prevent human trafficking in Northern Ireland. (AQW 18869/17-22)

**Mrs Long:** Equipping Northern Ireland to identify and eradicate modern slavery and human trafficking is a key priority. Further to my response to AQW 17987/17-22, my Department has now published the 2021/22 Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Strategy, which sets out key actions to pursue offenders; protect victims; and prevent trafficking in all its forms. This reflects the broad range of work that is needed to tackle a complex and often hidden form of criminality. The Strategy can be found at:

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/modern-slavery-and-human-trafficking-strategy-northern-ireland-21-22>

The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 provides that a person found guilty of an offence of slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour or an offence of human trafficking is liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for life. Section 5 of the Act amends the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 relating to sentencing provision for human trafficking and slavery-like offences. In doing so, section 5 brings these new offences under the ambit of the public protection sentencing framework provided for under Articles 13 and 14 of the 2008 Order so that, where the court considers it necessary for the purposes of public protection, it can impose a life sentence, an indeterminate custodial sentence or an extended custodial sentence. Individuals subject to such sentences would also be subject to the relevant release, licence and recall arrangements. It is for the independent judiciary to decide on the appropriate sentencing of those convicted of such offences.

Over the period 2010 to 2019 - there were 11<sup>3</sup> convictions at courts in Northern Ireland for human trafficking offences. Cases taken under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 can be extremely complex, and securing a conviction is challenging. In cases where it is not possible to secure prosecutions for trafficking, other offences are considered. As noted in my response to AQW 17987/17-22, you may be aware that the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) recently consulted on its revised Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Modern Slavery and Human

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1. Figures relate to initial disposals at court. Appeals are not included.
  2. Figures relate to cases where there was a conviction for at least one human trafficking offence.
  3. Figures relate to offences under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and other offences which specified human trafficking in the description.

Trafficking, which is aimed at providing practical and legal guidance to prosecutors dealing with such cases. Details of the existing policy can be found at: <https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/publications/policy-prosecuting-cases-modern-slavery-and-human-trafficking-draft-consultation>. I understand that the PPS is currently reviewing responses received during the consultation.

My Department alongside key statutory and non-statutory partners recognises the importance of taking a preventative approach to modern slavery and human trafficking. Under the 2021/22 Strategy, this includes seeking to reduce vulnerability to exploitation and re-exploitation, strengthening cross-sector resilience against modern slavery and raising public awareness to reduce demand and increase reporting. Activities include: ongoing support and promotion of initiatives to educate and provide rights-based information through NGO Engagement Group initiatives; engagement within and across statutory agencies to raise awareness of risk and promote good practice; and working through the Organised Crime Task Force subgroup on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking to identify and respond to emerging issues.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Justice how many people had taken a Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor in the weeks before their death, for each year since 2019.

**(AQW 18986/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) refers to a group of drugs not just one on its own; consequently I am therefore unable to answer on the basis that the Coroners Service for Northern Ireland can only complete a search of records where a death has been reported to the Coroner and where a specific drug has been mentioned in the formulation of the cause of death.

It should be noted that Coroners enquire into deaths reported to them that appear to be unexpected or unexplained, as a result of violence, an accident, as a result of negligence, from any other cause other than natural illness or disease, or in circumstances that require investigation.

**Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Justice whether she has received responses from her all her Executive colleagues on proposals for raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

**(AQW 18996/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** I can confirm that the position in relation to responses from my Executive Colleagues on proposals for raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility remains as it was in my answer to your previous question AQW 6608/17-22. At that time, responses had been received from the Ministers for Communities, Finance and Infrastructure. No further responses have since 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 Bill. However, any such proposal will require Executive approval and I intend to seek this in the coming weeks.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Justice when AQW 16403/17-22 will be answered.

**(AQW 18999/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** My response to AQW 16403/17-22 was issued to the Member on 24 March.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Justice who, apart from the PSNI and related security services, can provide security for Executive Ministers undertaking their public duties.

**(AQW 19346/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** My Department is not responsible for arranging security services for Executive Ministers.

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice what percentage of applications for criminal damage compensation were paid in the last twelve months.

**(AQO 2094/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Last financial year, my Department received 122 applications for criminal damage compensation.

53 of those applications were fully processed during that 12 month period. Compensation was paid in relation to 6 of those applications which equates to 11.3% of the applications for which the assessment process was completed.

Two applications were withdrawn and processing was not completed within that 12 month period for the remainder of the 122 applications.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the New Decade, New Approach commitment to increase police numbers to 7,500.

**(AQO 2095/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The Member will be aware that the funding package accompanying the New Decade New Approach (NDNA) document falls well short of the amount needed to deliver all the priorities set out by the British and Irish governments and that the delivery of additional police numbers to 7,500 is, therefore, largely dependent on the availability of Executive funding. In light of the NDNA commitment, my Department had submitted a bid to increase the number of police officers to 7,500.

The PSNI final resource opening allocation for 2021-22, subject to debate and vote by the Assembly, is £761.7m. In addition to this, PSNI has now received an in-year allocation of £12.3m. £9.8m of this will enable the PSNI to retain its current police numbers of approximately 7000, with £2.5m enabling the recruitment of 100 officers in 2021-22 towards the NDNA commitment to increase police officer numbers to 7,500.

The annual recurring costs of these additional officers will need to be provided for in future baselines from 2022-23. The Finance Minister has advised that future budgets will depend on the funding available and it will be for the Executive to agree allocations at that time.

I will continue working with Executive Colleagues, including the Minister of Finance, and the Chief Constable, to ensure we have a police service that is properly resourced in all aspects for the challenges it faces.

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on legislation enabling wills to be legally recognised when written in the Irish language.

**(AQO 2097/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** The New Decade, New Approach agreement committed the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring forward a framework recognising and celebrating Northern Ireland's diversity of identities and culture and accommodating cultural difference; and that legislation in respect of the Irish language would make any necessary statutory provision for wills to be validly made in Irish, as an option and matter for individual choice.

No express provision in respect of wills was, however, included in the draft legislation that was published alongside New Decade, New Approach.

Importantly, the draft legislation did, however, include provision to repeal the Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) 1737, which would remove any possible legislative obstacle to the court admitting to probate or otherwise dealing with an Irish-language will.

I look forward to that legislation being brought to the Assembly.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the Ballymurphy inquest findings.

**(AQO 2098/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** Firstly, I wish to pay tribute to the courage and fortitude of the families over the last 50 years. It is not only unfortunate that it took so long for them to hear the findings of the Coroner that their loved ones were "innocent and their deaths were without justification", but the lengthy delay reflects poorly on how the UK government has chosen to discharge its legal obligations to addressing the legacy of the troubles.

I wish to express appreciation for the efforts of the Coroner and the Legacy Inquest Unit who worked with the families and their legal teams to bring this complex series of inquests to completion.

As Minister for Justice it is not appropriate to comment on each and every finding. These will rightly be considered by those for whom they have potential operational implications.

Instead, my assessment focuses on the implications for the UK Government and us, as elected representatives for the people of Northern Ireland. The Inquest findings tell the UK Government it needs to find the political will to deal with the outstanding legacy issues honestly and in a way which ensures that both truth and justice will prevail.

Responsibility for legacy legislation was a commitment made by the UK Government, in New Decade, New Approach. The commitment was, within 100 days, to publish and introduce legislation in the UK Parliament to implement the Stormont

House Agreement, to address Northern Ireland legacy issues.

Not only did that not occur but the change of approach announced in March 2020 and in the last week, proposes to take the focus away from a justice resolution to a truth recovery and reconciliation system. It is more than disappointing that the detail of the UK government proposals continues to be sadly lacking.

My concern is that any deficiencies within the Westminster proposals or legislation, which fail to meet UK legal obligations whether domestic or international, will place significant additional pressures and cost upon Northern Ireland's justice system. I say this against the background that the only tangible progress delivered since the Stormont House Agreement in 2014 has been the Coroners Legacy Inquest Project.

I have stressed to the Secretary of State the importance of adequately resourcing the justice system in Northern Ireland to discharge the legacy pressures we will have to address.

**Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Justice to outline what her Department is doing to address human trafficking in Northern Ireland.

**(AQO 2101/17-22)**

**Mrs Long:** My Department is responsible for the policy and legislative framework relating to modern slavery and human trafficking. Tackling this form of criminality is a key priority.

I am due to launch the Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Strategy for 2021/22, which sets out how my Department and its partners will work towards the eradication of these crimes in Northern Ireland. The Strategy sets out actions under three themes: Pursuing offenders; protecting victims; and preventing this form of criminality.

In implementing the strategy, my Department provides support and assistance to adult potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking through contracted support providers. This helps to ensure that the needs of potential victims are met, including in respect of appropriate secure accommodation, assistance in obtaining healthcare, translation and interpretation services and assistance with repatriation.

In addition, my Department co-ordinates the Organised Crime Task Force and through its Modern Slavery Human Trafficking Sub Group, works collaboratively to identify, understand and tackle the issues alongside key operational partners. My Department works with civil society through the NGO Engagement Group to inform the development of policy and to raise awareness of modern slavery and human trafficking. I also launched a consultation seeking views on measures to improve transparency in supply chains in both commercial and public sector organisations.

Addressing complex issues relating to modern slavery and human trafficking requires a long term, holistic and collaborative approach. I am therefore seeking to move towards a three year strategy, subject to the Assembly approving the relevant provisions within the forthcoming Justice Bill. This will provide my Department and its partners with the opportunity to address a range of issues on a more comprehensive, long term basis.

Much progress has been made, and my Department will continue to work in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders to disrupt traffickers and to safeguard those who have been exploited.

## Department for the Economy

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether laptop repair shops will be able to open when COVID-19 restrictions are introduced on 27 November 2020.

**(AQW 10761/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** This is not within the remit of my Department.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy when AQW 14111/17-22 will be answered.

**(AQW 15442/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** AQW 14111/17-22 was answered on the 24 March 2021.

**Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has any plans to require caravan site operators that have received financial assistance during periods of site closure to refund site tenants who have had to pay a full year annual fee despite sites being closed.

**(AQW 16907/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** It is not for my Department to intervene on this matter. This is a contractual issue between the caravan owners and the owners / managers of the caravan park on which they are sited.

**Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what direct engagement she has had with the Minister of Health on workplace safety from COVID-19, including inspections by the Health and Safety Executive.

**(AQW 17127/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** There has been engagement between myself and the Health Minister on workplace safety as part of discussions at the Executive. This resulted in the creation of an Engagement Forum, where workplace safety in relation to Covid-19 was discussed. HSENI were represented on the Forum.

**Mr Givan** asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm whether touring caravans and motorhomes are included in the relaxations of COVID-19 restrictions applicable from the 30 April 2021 which meet the criterion as being self contained tourist accommodation.

**(AQW 17459/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** A review of the current restrictions took place on 15 April and 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 includes any accommodation which does not require guests to share washing facilities, toilets or kitchens.

Guests can only share holiday accommodation with the people they live with in their household, and people in their bubble.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on NI Direct at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

**Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will be delivering a second payment for the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme.

**(AQW 18129/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) provided a one off grant of £3,500 to newly self-employed individuals (sole traders and those in partnerships) whose business was adversely impacted by Covid and who at the time of the scheme launch were not eligible to access support from the UK government's Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

The scheme launched 3 December 2020 and closed to new applicants on

19 February 2021. To date it has paid out a total of £8.7m in financial support.

Going forward, 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 published roadmap, 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions', and the associated health regulations.

**Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for the Economy to provide details of the dates of her meetings since she took up office with (i) representatives of the universities or university colleges; (ii) representatives of the further education colleges; (iii) representatives of other training providers; (iv) further and higher education trade union representatives; and (v) student union representatives.

**(AQW 18250/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:**

- (i) The following list details dates of the meetings with representatives of the universities and university colleges between the period of 1st January 2020 and 31st December 2020 and is available on this link:

Ministers' Meetings with External Organisations/Individuals January to December 2020 - Datasets - Open Data NI (<https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/dataset/ministers-meetings-with-external-organisations-and-individuals-january-to-june-2020>)

- 05/03/2020 – Ulster University
- 16/04/2020 – Queen's University Belfast
- 29/04/2020 – Ulster University
- 11/06/2020 – Queen's University Belfast
- 24/06/2020 – Ulster University
- 07/12/2020 – Queen's University Belfast

The following in year list details dates of the meetings with representatives of the universities and university colleges between the period of 1st January 2021 and 5th May 2021:

- 25/01/2021 – Ulster University and Queens University Belfast
- 03/02/2021 – Ulster University
- 24/03/2021 – Ulster University
- 07/04/2021 – Ulster University

- (ii) The following list details meetings with representatives of the further education colleges between the period of 1st January 2020 and 31st December 2020 and is available on this link:

Ministers' Meetings with External Organisations/Individuals January to December 2020 - Datasets - Open Data NI (<https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/dataset/ministers-meetings-with-external-organisations-and-individuals-january-to-june-2020>)

05/05/2020 – Southern Regional College

20/07/2020 – South Eastern Regional College, Southern Regional College and South West Regional College

03/08/2020 – South Eastern Regional College, Southern Regional College, South West Regional College, Northern Regional College, North West Regional College, and Belfast Metropolitan College

02/09/2020 – Northern Regional College

The following in year list details dates of the meetings with representatives of the further education colleges between the period of 1st January 2021 and 5th May 2021:

26/04/2021 – South Eastern Regional College

05/05/2021 – Southern Regional College

(iii) There was only one meeting which took place with representatives of other training providers between the period 1st January 2020 and 31st December 2020 and the period between 1st January 2021 and 5th May 2021, which was:

02/09/2020 - Visit to Impact Training (Lanark Way)

(iv) There were no meetings with representatives of further and higher education trade unions between the period 1st January 2020 and 31st December 2020 or the period between 1st January 2021 and 5th May 2021.

(v) The following list details meetings with representatives of the student unions between the period of 1st January 2020 and 31st December 2020 and is available on this link:

Ministers' Meetings with External Organisations/Individuals January to December 2020 - Datasets - Open Data NI (<https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/dataset/ministers-meetings-with-external-organisations-and-individuals-january-to-june-2020>)

25/03/2020 - NUS-USI (National Union of Students, Union of Students in Ireland)

There have been no meetings with representatives of the student unions between the period of 1st January 2021 and 5th May 2021.

**Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether the COVID-19 Restart Grant scheme will be available in Northern Ireland.

**(AQW 18313/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Department for the Economy (DfE) has led in the delivery of business related support, providing approximately £440 million of much needed funds to support local businesses from all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland, with the primary aim of helping these businesses to survive the pandemic, and protect as many local jobs as possible.

Whilst these schemes have closed to new applicants, payments under my Department's Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) Part A and Part B will continue to be paid automatically for the period that restrictions apply, as appropriate. The Department has no plans to introduce any new schemes at this time.

As we look forward, my Department's focus is on a speedy and un-interrupted re-opening of the NI economy, in line with the Executive's roadmap 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions', and the associated health regulations.

My Department has also published its 'Economic Recovery Action Plan', which sets out a number of key actions and proposals in the short to medium term as we emerge from Covid-19. These actions will enable local companies and businesses to avail of global economic opportunities; help our people to prosper through new and better jobs; increase our skills base, and improve our productivity and competitiveness.

Also, as part of the 'Action Plan', my Department will launch the High Street Stimulus Scheme, which will provide individual adults with a prepaid card to be spent at 'bricks and mortar' businesses including retail and hospitality in our towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland, when it is deemed safe and most effective to do so.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what independent or internal assessments or reviews into the NI Sustainable Energy Programme, including its value for money, have taken place; and (ii) to detail the conclusions of those assessments or reviews.

**(AQW 18455/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:**

(i) A review of NISEP took place in 2019, carried out by the Utility Regulator along with the Department for the Economy and the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland. The review process included a Call for Evidence and extensive stakeholder engagement, alongside research overseen by the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.

(ii) The NISEP review highlighted that there remains strong support for NISEP as an energy efficiency programme and for the ring-fencing of funding for vulnerable customers. The review also highlighted that from 2010, NISEP has consistently delivered high lifetime customer benefits (based on the value of the lifetime energy saved).

The main outcome of the review was a decision to extend the NISEP until 2025, or until a decision regarding any potential replacement is decided upon in the context of the new Energy Strategy (whichever is sooner).

**Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how many investors engaged with Invest NI regarding potential inward investment opportunities; and (ii) how many new foreign direct investment projects have commenced, in each of the last three years.

**(AQW 18500/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Invest NI has a strong pipeline of FDI engagements and potential investment opportunities. However, Invest NI is unable to provide the specific investment prospect figures as this information is commercially sensitive and would give its main competitors an unfair insight into the agency's work to attract inward investment.

The historical number of FDI projects secured for Northern Ireland as a result of Invest NI's efforts is detailed in the table below. This table details the last three years published to date. The figures for 2020\21 will be released within the Invest NI year-end 2020\21 press releases later in this calendar year. Until such time this information remains commercially sensitive and cannot be detailed in this response.

Year	Number of New to NI FDI Projects Approved
2017-18	23
2018-19	17
2019-20	28

Invest NI continues to promote Northern Ireland as a destination of choice for mobile foreign direct investment, based on a compelling value proposition that combines our key strengths of a talented and loyal workforce, advanced telecoms infrastructure, a pro-business environment, competitive operating costs and proximity to major markets.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the statement by the chair of the Carbon Trust, Dame Julia King, that using electricity directly is always going to be better than turning electricity into hydrogen and using the hydrogen.

**(AQW 18648/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** I am not aware of the statement to which you refer, however, Dame Julia King, while giving evidence to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee on 3 March 2021, stated her full support to the UK Government for the development of both blue and green hydrogen.

Hydrogen is a cross-cutting, multi-modal capable fuel, meaning it can be used in multiple energy sectors, providing benefits where direct electrification is challenging or not possible.

I look forward to the responses to the Energy Strategy Options Consultation to identify potential applications in Northern Ireland and inform future policy in this area.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the current and planned employment initiatives her Department is engaged with East Londonderry; and (ii) the number of employment or training places that will be created as a result.

**(AQW 18687/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department invests significantly right across Northern Ireland, in what could be regarded as training and upskilling.

Employers create apprenticeship opportunities in line with their business needs. My Department's ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher Level Apprenticeship programmes provide funded apprenticeship training at levels 2 to 7 across a range of occupational areas. Apprentices are employed and paid directly by employers, and training is delivered through Northern Ireland based colleges, universities and non-statutory contractors, several of which are located in the East Londonderry constituency.

In addition, the Apprenticeship Return, Retain, Result and Recruit schemes are in place to incentivise employers to return apprentices from furlough and recruit new apprentices, including those previously made redundant. To date a total of £127,668 has been paid to employers in East Londonderry under both schemes, which has helped return 43 apprentices from furlough and create 38 new apprenticeship opportunities.

The amendment to the current age-eligibility criteria by the end of this year for apprenticeships under the ApprenticeshipsNI programme will also create new opportunities for those aged 25 and over in East Londonderry and across Northern Ireland.

My Department is introducing reforms to the vocational education landscape this September with Skill for Life and Work and the NI Traineeship. This new provision will help to ensure there is a well understood progression pathway that meets the needs of participants, the labour market and the wider economy.

Skills for Life and Work is a vocational education programme for young people aged 16–17 years (with extended age eligibility for those with a disability or from an in-care background) who require training primarily at Entry Level and Level 1. The first participants will commence on programme in September 2021.

The training will be primarily aimed at young people aged 16-17, with extended age criteria for some groups. It aims to deliver a portfolio of personal development, employability and essential skills alongside professional and technical training.

The NI Traineeship is the new full-time Level 2 vocational education and training provision that will provide participants with the opportunity to achieve a full level 2 outcome. Developed in partnership with employers, the Traineeship will provide participants with the skills and qualifications necessary to secure employment in their chosen occupation. The Traineeship combines vocational training, structured work placement and numeracy & literacy qualifications to support an individual's progression onto a Level 3 Apprenticeship, other Further Education qualifications or into employment. The programme will be delivered by Further Education Colleges throughout Northern Ireland, including those in the East Londonderry constituency and will be open to all age groups. When fully operational Traineeships will be available across more than 30 occupational areas.

The ESF programme Priority Axis 1 & 2 is designed to fund activity to enhance and extend employment opportunities, in particular, for those groups at a disadvantage in the labour market who are unemployed, including long term unemployed or economically inactive. In Call 2 of the 2014 – 20 NI ESF programme 4 Projects located with the East Londonderry consistency were approved funding for the period April 2018 – March 2022.

Enterprise NI Ltd (ENI) and Roe Valley Community Education Forum (RVCEF) Ltd were approved funding under the unemployed and economically inactive strand for projects with 4 year total eligible costs of £2.9m. At the end of year 3 these 2 projects have enrolled 61% (1467 participants) against a 4 year targets of 2396. At the end of year 3 they have achieved into employment rates of 39% against a target of 19% and into education rates of 22% against a target of 10%.

Limavady Community Development Initiative (LCDI) and Rapid were approved funding under the disability strand for projects with 4 year eligibility costs of £1.5m. At the end of year 3 these 2 projects have enrolled 81% (219 participants) against a 4 year target of 272. At the end of Year 3 they have achieved their into employment rate of 9% and have achieved an into education rate of 25% against a target of 18%. These results were achieved despite the COVID restrictions of Year 3.

The Assured Skills programme is a demand-led, pre-employment training programme which helps individuals gain the skills they need to compete for guaranteed job vacancies with new Foreign Direct Investment companies and expanding local based businesses.

In the North West, through the Assured Skills Academy model, the programme has supported both FinTrU and Alchemy Technology Services Ltd, delivering industry-focused training that helps equip participants with the skills demanded by growing companies.

To date 13 academies have been completed for these employers in the North West, resulting in the upskilling of 243 people for financial and technology roles. 229 of those participants secured employment with the two companies.

A new Financial Services Academy is ongoing with 19 people currently in training, and a Technology Services Academy has recently launched with 20 further positions available.

Over the course of this financial year Assured Skills hopes to support at least another 3 academies for FinTrU and Alchemy in the North West.

Assured Skills has also funded 2 collaborative Welding Academies, partnering with NWRC, which has resulted in 25 people being upskilled, and 24 of those being employed as welders.

My Department is working closely with NWRC to develop a series of additional Collaborative Welding Academies that are expected to be delivered before March 2022. This highlights my commitment to ensuring that my Department responds positively to the needs of the manufacturing sector given the pivotal role it will play in the recovery of the economy.

In 2020/2021, the Skills Intervention Programme delivered upskilling courses for individuals whose employment status was impacted by the pandemic. Further Education Colleges and local Universities (including UU & NWRC) provided a range of online courses to facilitate the programme engaging with individuals across Northern Ireland including East Londonderry.

In 2021, as part of the Executive's Economic Recovery Action Plan, a Flexible Skills Fund has been established to help upskill and reskill individuals to meet the needs of the economy as we emerge from the pandemic and continue to grow the Economy beyond it. This three-year programme, with funding provided from the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Office, will build on the work of the Skills Interventions Programme. This programme will be encouraging engagement of participants right across all regions within Northern Ireland.

The Flexible Skills Fund will be utilised to support a range of educational opportunities from entry level to Level 7 qualifications. Initial delivery of the Flexible Skills Fund will be provided by the further and higher education sectors. Courses will be linked directly to the priority areas for economic growth. Courses will enable longer term employment opportunities for individuals across all regions of Northern Ireland.

**Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether the appeals process for the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme will be expanded to reconsider business grant applications which have been rejected by the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme but which are eligible under the CRBSS.

**(AQW 18784/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) parts A and B closed to new applicants at 6pm on the 7th April. I can confirm that a process is being developed that will allow for applications to the CRBSS if they have been rejected from the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) close to or after the closing date of the CRBSS.



There are ongoing discussions with other relevant Government Departments to discuss and set out this process, the details of which will be published in coming weeks alongside information on how potential applicants will be notified of their eligibility to apply for the Scheme.

**Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how many employers are estimated to deny or restrict bereavement pay.

**(AQW 18884/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** In the absence of routine or official recording of such information, there is no readily available credible source through which it is possible to determine or estimate how many employers deny or restrict bereavement pay.

That said, I am aware of many employers who do in fact offer paid compassionate or special leave as a way of supporting staff in the event of bereavement and I would obviously encourage all employers to do so.

Even in the event of an employer not offering paid bereavement leave, all employees have a 'day 1' right to unpaid time off to deal with emergencies involving dependents, which includes the death of a dependent. This right extends to attending the funeral of a dependent and for arranging the funeral or making any other necessary practical arrangements.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy, given the impact of COVID-19, to outline the action she is taking to support students leaving post-primary education to take their next steps towards further or higher education.

**(AQW 18890/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department's Careers Service offers impartial advice and guidance to all pupils in their final years of post-primary education, on all the options available including further and higher education, apprenticeships and higher level apprenticeships and employment.

Over the past year Careers Advisers have worked with schools to ensure that young people could access personalised support digitally through email, telephone or video calls. To date 16,500 pupils have accessed this service this year and Careers advisers will continue to offer support over the summer period to help students make informed decisions about their career options.

My Department is continuing its investment in the Further Education (FE) estate to deliver modern, efficient, fit for purpose campuses that are welcoming, comfortable, healthy, neutral and vibrant places to learn and innovate.

In 2020, two major capital projects to build new campuses were completed in Banbridge and Armagh with a further new campus, in Enniskillen, being completed in April 2021. It is hoped that sector wide marketing and promotional campaigns undertaken over the coming months will encourage increased number of students leaving post primary schools in 2021 to avail of the state of the art, accessible facilities, offering significantly improved student facilities and support infrastructure and providing an enhanced curriculum offering, utilising the latest technology and equipment.

This capital investment has taken place alongside a major investment by my Department in college administrative systems meaning that learners can now apply and enrol on-line for courses at their local FE colleges. This is particularly important during the current public health restrictions removing the need for large numbers of learners on-site at a particular time.

Colleges have the capacity and are particularly well placed to accommodate any students who have found their education disrupted by the recent pandemic and will provide them with the knowledge, skills and support they need to progress to employment or higher education.

In order to raise public awareness of these opportunities available through FE, DfE has now commissioned the six colleges to work together to create a collective identity for the sector and to develop an annual campaign which will focus specifically on promoting the unique product offering for full time FE including higher education (HE) provision.

The Department recognises the clear potential for learning deficits to affect people who are entering higher education this coming year, due to the impact of the pandemic and officials are in discussions with both the HE and FE sectors on how best to mitigate this.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of concerns that due to decisions on providing predicted grades for A-level courses for this year, students seeking to move into higher education through access to higher education courses are at a disadvantage, compared to students undertaking A-levels; and (ii) what action she is taking to ensure fairness amongst all prospective higher education students.

**(AQW 18891/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** An offer of a place in higher education is often made based on predicted grades at the point of application and before results are known. This applies equally for applicants on Access courses and A-level courses. When results are published, those who fulfil their offer of a place are admitted.

As autonomous bodies, universities are responsible for their own policies and procedures on admissions. No additional action is necessary to ensure fairness, as Access students will be treated in the same way as other Level 3 applicants in the 2021 admissions cycle.

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm the awarding bodies and the level of vocational qualifications that may be attained by trainees on her Department's supported apprenticeship programmes.

**(AQW 18924/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department continues to fund the off-the-job training of apprentices enrolled in the ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher Level Apprenticeships programmes from Level 2 to Level 7.

A wide range of vocational qualifications are offered across both of these apprenticeship programmes. The awarding bodies providing these qualifications are listed below.

**ApprenticeshipsNI – Awarding Bodies offering vocational qualifications at Level 2 and Level 3;**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| ■ 1st4Sport  | ■ Institute of Export   |
| ■ Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT)                | ■ Institute of Workplace and Facilities Management (IWFM)         |
| ■ Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA)      | ■ Lantra  |
| ■ Active IQ  | ■ The London Institute of Banking & Finance (LIBF)                |
| ■ AIM Qualifications   | ■ Northern Council for Further Education (NCFE)                   |
| ■ British Horse Society Qualifications (BHSQ)                | ■ National Open College Network (NOCN) (NOCN CSkills)             |
| ■ BIIAB Qualifications Ltd                                   | ■ Open College Network NI (OCNNI)                                 |
| ■ CABWI Awarding Body  | ■ Open College Network London (OCNLR)                             |
| ■ Chartered Insurance Institute (CII)                        | ■ Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR)                                 |
| ■ Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (UK) (CILT) | ■ Pearson   |
| ■ The Chartered Institute for Securities & Investment (CISI) | ■ Packaging Industry Awarding Body Company (UK) (PIABC)           |
| ■ City & Guilds  | ■ Propertymark Qualifications                                     |
| ■ The Chartered Management Institute (CMI)                   | ■ ProQual   |
| ■ EAL  | ■ Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC)                  |
| ■ ETC Awards Limited (ETCAL)                                 | ■ Skills and Education Group (SEG Awards)                         |
| ■ FutureQuals (FAQ)  | ■ Skills for Justice (SFJ)  |
| ■ Food and Drink Qualifications (FDQ)                        | ■ Trinity College London (TCL)                                    |
| ■ Focus Awards   | ■ Training Qualifications UK Ltd (TQUK)                           |
| ■ GQA Qualifications   | ■ VetSkill  |
| ■ Highfield Qualifications                                   | ■ Vocational Training Charitable Trust (VTCT)                     |
| ■ iCan Qualifications (iCQ)                                  | ■ Waste Management Industry Training and Advisory Board (WAMITAB) |
| ■ The Institute of the Motor Industry (IMI)                  | ■ YMCA Awards   |

**Higher Level Apprenticeships – Awarding Bodies offering vocational qualifications at Levels 4-7;**

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| ■ Accounting Technicians Ireland                           | ■ GQA Qualifications Ltd          |
| ■ Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education (CACHE) | ■ Ulster University (UU)          |
| ■ Pearson  | ■ Queens University Belfast (QUB) |
| ■ City & Guilds  | ■ Open University (OU)            |

**Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for the Economy given amendments to the Industrial Emissions Directive and Large Combustion Plant Directive that come into force in August 2021 and that will have the effect of limiting emissions from gas turbines used in energy generation, for her assessment of whether any decision on the Islandmagee gas storage project should be delayed until the outcome is known of the Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland

**(AQW 18925/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Northern Ireland has benefitted from significant increases in electricity generation from renewable technologies, in particular from on-shore wind. However, wind generation is intermittent, and there is a need to maintain sufficient fossil-fuelled generation to meet electricity demand when renewable generation is not available. Gas-fired generation is the least polluting conventional generation and, while gas-fired plants will have to comply with all relevant emissions legislation, they will remain an essential part of our generation mix, at least in the short to medium term, contributing to our security of energy supply.

My Department issued a three month public consultation on Energy Strategy policy options on 31 March 2021, and intends to publish the new strategy by the end of this year. As the Energy Strategy is developed, further consideration will be given to security of supply risks and potential mitigations, and this may include energy storage considerations.

The Islandmagee gas storage project is being taken forward by private sector developers without direct financial support from Government, and the decision to proceed with the project, subject to finalising outstanding consents and approvals, is a matter for the developers.

**Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will roll out the period poverty pilot scheme to further education colleges in September 2021, to coincide with the roll out in universities.  
**(AQW 18941/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** The six Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland currently provide access to free sanitary products within the majority of their campuses.

Notwithstanding this, colleges will, in line with the Higher Education pilot, be funded for a period poverty pilot scheme in the next academic year.

My Department's Further Education Division is undertaking a comprehensive review of Student Support in FE colleges which does, amongst other things, seek to quantify trends and demand for free sanitary products for students, and make appropriate recommendations for improvement, if necessary. The data provided by the pilot in further education will help inform this review.

**Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy further to the additional job losses at Collins Aerospace Killeel, whether she has made any representations to the UK Government with a view to developing a financial support package aimed at hastening the recovery of the Aerospace Industry.  
**(AQW 18953/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** I meet aerospace industry representatives and the sector body, ADS, on a regular basis, most recently with the ADS NI Council in March, to hear directly about the extraordinary challenges being faced by Aviation and Aerospace, induced by COVID-19. I also meet Whitehall Ministerial colleagues bilaterally and as part of a Devolved Nations Group to represent the economic interests of Northern Ireland including Aerospace.

There are no specific Covid response measures available to the aerospace sector; however businesses within this sector have availed of the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) and Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CLBILS), Job Retention Scheme ('CJRS') and other fiscal measures to mitigate against the challenges of the pandemic.

To date, the UK Government has put substantial support in place to help. The aerospace sector and its aviation customers are being supported with almost £11 billion made available through the Bank of England's Covid Corporate Financing Facility, grants for research and development, loan guarantees and support for exporters.

In addition, I have also lobbied directly to the chancellor in February 2021 to seek clarification at the time on the possible extension of the CJRS as aerospace companies had expressed their concern that if this were to end in April it would have had a significant impact on the number of employees being made redundant. This was subsequently extended to September 2021.

BEIS and Invest NI are working jointly, and in partnership with ADS, to support the aerospace industry in Northern Ireland through programmes like the Aerospace Technology Institute, National Aerospace Technology Exploitation Programme, Sharing in Growth and 21st Century Supply Chain Programme (SC21) Competitiveness & Growth.

Invest NI has also rolled out a series of COVID-19 response programmes aimed at supporting business across a number of areas including capital investment, operational excellence, supply chain resilience and strategic planning. These programmes have been received positively by both the aerospace sector and wider NI industry enabling businesses to remain viable and competitive as they implement their exit plan from the current pandemic.

I fully appreciate the challenges faced by the NI aerospace industry and shall continue to do everything possible to represent the interests of the sector.

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Economy whether the British Government's Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill will have any impact on local higher education institutions in terms of conditional access to funding.  
**(AQW 18956/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** No.

**Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for the Economy whether consideration has been given as to when universities can expect to return to face to face learning, including the indicative timescales.  
**(AQW 18970/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** I recently announced £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, and the reduction in levels of Coronavirus transmission and positivity, I believe that we should be facilitating the return for all students as soon as it is possible and appropriate. I asked Executive colleagues to consider the current advice and am pleased that they have agreed to progress to stage 4 of the "Pathway to Recovery" which allows for increased face-to-face teaching for Higher Education and student extracurricular and support activities to be resumed.

As our Universities are autonomous institutions, the implementation and model of this provision is for them to consider based on public health advice from the Executive. However this change allows providers sufficient time to plan the curriculum, with appropriate mitigations, for the new academic year and also offers reassurances to students about what their student experience will look like.

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what support her Department has invested, over the current mandate, in improving career prospects for former military personnel (i) generally; and (ii) in politics.  
(AQW 19018/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department does not have specific data on support for military personnel.

However, the Careers Service offers personalised advice and guidance to all, including former military personnel, about career options. Careers advisers have access to up to date information, developed by the Department's economists, on the various pathways available, suited to the specific needs, talents and circumstances of each individual. They can advise on how to acquire skills in demand, and to help people compete for employment in growing and emerging sectors. Contact details for the Department's Careers Service is available on Nirect/careers.

My Department also plays a key role enable and support people to obtain the skills and qualifications needed in order to progress to a higher level of education and training or into employment.

In addition to the existing provision, the draft Skills Strategy sets out a programme of actions required to modernise Northern Ireland's skills system. In the short-term, the priority of the draft Strategy is to respond to the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The draft Strategy will establish a skills framework to address the key, long term structural issues in our economy, which includes too many individuals with low, or no skills; limited opportunities for high paying jobs and pathways for career progression, a 'skills deficit' and comparatively poor productivity performance.

My Department recently published 'A 10X Economy' which sets out the economic vision for Northern Ireland over the next decade and a commitment to encourage greater collaboration and innovation to deliver a ten times better economy that will benefit all the people of Northern Ireland. The importance of transforming the skills system is central to delivering an economy that is 10x stronger, 10x more prosperous and 10x more resilient.

**Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on repayments of the loan provided to Presbyterian Mutual Society by the NI Executive.  
(AQW 19025/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** As at 31 March 2021 £131.5m has been repaid from the £175m loan provided to the Presbyterian Mutual Society leaving a balance outstanding of £43.5m.

Current forecasts indicate there will potentially be a shortfall of £18.5m and an Expected Credit Loss provision, with budget cover, has been recognised to cover this in the Department for the Economy's 2020/21 accounts.

In addition, due to the order of repayment of the various loans, a £50m loan provided under the Mutual Access Fund is now considered unrecoverable, however this had been written down to nil in previous years.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the breakdown, by sector, of those workers currently on furlough.  
(AQW 19041/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** The latest HMRC information on the furlough scheme shows there were approximately 99,400 employments furloughed in Northern Ireland on 31 March 2021. Of those on furlough locally, almost a third (31%) were partially furloughed.

The number of employments on furlough in Northern Ireland is broken down by sector in the table below.

Sector	Employments on Furlough in NI on 31 March 2021
Agriculture, forestry and fishing, Mining and quarrying, Energy production and supply & Water supply, sewerage and waste	910
Manufacturing	9,560
Construction	5,590
Wholesale and retail; repair of motor vehicles	24,760
Transportation and storage	3,080
Accommodation and food services	23,290
Information and communication, Financial and insurance & Real estate	3,850
Professional and scientific and technical	4,300

Sector	Employments on Furlough in NI on 31 March 2021
Administrative and support services	4,990
Education	1,470
Health and Social Work	4,150
Arts, entertainment and recreation	6,150
Other service activities	5,060
Public administration and defence; social security, Households & Other	2,290
<b>Total</b>	<b>99,400</b>

The two sectors with the highest number of people on furlough are Wholesale & Retail and Accommodation & Food Services. It is important to note that these figures relate to March and with the easing of restrictions since then, particularly the reopening of non-essential retail, hospitality and accommodation, I would expect to see further reductions in the number of workers on furlough over the coming months.

However, I am pleased the furlough scheme is being made available for businesses until the end of September. That will provide a basis for economic recovery to gain momentum, supported by my Department's Economic Recovery Action Plan. Building that momentum will be key to delivering my longer term vision for the NI economy as set out in 10X Economy – an economic vision for a decade of innovation.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy what action she is taking to address the increasing number of employers that are firing staff in order to re-hire them on lower pay and less favourable conditions of employment.  
(AQW 19077/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I would direct the Member to my response to AQW 17614, which also relates to the matter of 'fire and re-hire' practices in Northern Ireland.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will introduce legislation to amend the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 to specify that fire and re-hire redundancies will automatically be regarded as unfair dismissals.  
(AQW 19078/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I would direct the Member to my response to AQW 17614, which also relates to the matter of 'fire and re-hire' practices in Northern Ireland.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether the outcome of the RHI Tariff Review consultation includes a backdating to 1 April 2020 of any resulting tariff increase.  
(AQW 19080/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** The outworking of the 2020 Tariff Review public consultation was reflected in options 2 and 4 of the recent consultation on the future of the Non-Domestic RHI Scheme, which concluded on 9 April 2021. The final decision on the future of the Scheme will be taken by the Executive collectively and the outcome of the consultation will assist the Executive in making its determination.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy what action she intends to take to address economic hardship amongst RHI Scheme participants as reported in the Buglass Review of Economic impact.  
(AQW 19081/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** The findings of the Buglass Report were considered in the development of options for the future of the Non-Domestic RHI Scheme, which were subject to recent public consultation. The final decision on the future of the Scheme will be taken by the Executive collectively and the outcome of the consultation will assist the Executive in making its determination.

**Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for the Economy what steps her Department is taking to support the wedding events industry.  
(AQW 19152/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** Since March 2020, the NI Executive and the UK Government have introduced an unprecedented number of interventions and packages of financial support to help those who have been affected by the consequences of Covid-19.

The Department for the Economy (DfE) has led in the delivery of business related support, providing approximately £485 million of much needed funds to support local businesses from all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland, with the primary aim of helping these businesses to survive the pandemic, and protect as many local jobs as possible.

Businesses in the wedding events industry may have been eligible for support under my Department's Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

Many businesses in this sector may also have been eligible for support under UK Government schemes such as the Job Retention Scheme (furlough) for their employees and the Self-Employment Income Support Schemes (SEISS). I also launched the Newly Self Employed Support Scheme and the Limited Company Director's Support Scheme for individuals who have not been eligible for SEISS.

The Department has no plans to introduce any new schemes at this time. Rather, the Department's focus is on the full and un-interrupted re-opening of the NI economy, in line with the Executive's roadmap, 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions', and the associated health regulations.

**Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is taking any measures to ensure the £100 High Street Voucher Scheme will be spent in local retailers and not in large multi-national outlets.

**(AQW 19252/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department will be undertaking a consultation and engagement process with all relevant stakeholders to inform scheme development.

Further information on the High Street Stimulus Scheme, including all the outlets where the pre-paid card can be used, will be made available through a multi-media advertising campaign to reach all audiences, prior to its implementation.

**Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy to detail any discussions she has had with Northern Ireland's universities regarding reimbursing halls of residence fees paid by students who had no face-to-face lectures during the tenancy and who didn't use the accommodation.

**(AQW 19264/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:** Earlier this year, I wrote to Northern Ireland's universities and university colleges, on behalf of students, asking them to consider how they might support their students by engaging with private accommodation providers, as well as reviewing their own accommodation policies (where applicable) to ensure they are fair, transparent and have the best interests of students at heart.

Over the course of the pandemic, the universities have taken measures such as rental pauses and releasing students from accommodation contracts, in order to relieve some of the financial strains being experienced by students.

I subsequently secured an additional £37.7million from the Executive to fund a financial support package for higher education. This package includes £3.1million to compensate universities for lost income arising from rental pauses and releasing students from accommodation contracts.

**Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether year 13 and 14 students will receive EMA payments until the end of the current term; (ii) whether the summer bonus will be paid as normal; (iii) whether normal arrangements have been changed; and (iv) what consultation took place prior to the decision being taken.

**(AQW 19379/17-22)**

**Mrs Dodds:**

- (i) As has been the case in previous years, Year 13 and 14 pupils who are entitled to Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) will continue to receive EMA support until the end of the current school term as long as they continue to engage with learning on their course. It remains a matter for schools to decide the best way to deliver this learning for these pupils during the current summer term and to apply their schools' attendance policies in accordance with DE Circular 2020/08;
- (ii) Pupils who have been deemed by their Learning Centre (school) to have met their agreed performance-related targets will be eligible for the EMA June Bonus payment, as has been the case in previous years;
- (iii) Payment of the EMA weekly allowance continues to be dependent upon a pupil's attendance/ engagement with learning, and payment of the June Bonus contingent upon meeting agreed performance-related targets. Normal arrangements have therefore not been changed; and
- (iv) As schools are open as normal, the approach to payment of EMA and the end of year bonus has not changed, therefore a consultation exercise was not required.

Frequently Asked Questions and Guidance for Learning Centres (schools) on the operation of the EMA Scheme is available on the Student Loans Company's online EMA Portal.

# Revised Written Answers

This section contains the revised 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.





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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 7 May 2021

## Revised Written Answer

### Department of Finance

*In this Bound Volume, page WA 35, replace the answer given for AQW 16399/17-22 with:*

**Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance to detail the COVID-19 schemes approved under Ministerial Direction during 2019/20 and 2020/21.

**(AQW 16399/17-22)**

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** I responded to your written Assembly Question AQW 16399/17-22 on the 24th March where I provided a list of Covid Schemes which had been taken forward under Ministerial Direction. Unfortunately my response contained two errors and I am now seeking to correct this and provide an update on the Ministerial Directions issued for Covid schemes since the original response.

The updated list of all COVID-19 Schemes for 2019-20 and 2020-21 approved to date under Ministerial Direction is attached at Annex A. This annex replaces the response issued previously.

A revised response has been necessary to remove Department for Economy's City of Derry Airport Public Service Obligation (CoDA PSO) 2021-23. Although funding was provided for the PSO in 2020-21 due to the impact of COVID-19, the payment from DFE to CODA did not require a Ministerial Direction. However, a Ministerial Direction was issued in 2020-21 to fund expenditure for the CODA PSO in 2021-22 and 2022-23 but this expenditure is not COVID funding.

I had also included the Reimbursement of Strike Pay to healthcare workers for the period November 2019 to January 2020 in the previous response. Although this was taken forward under Ministerial Direction, it is not part of a COVID-19 Scheme. I have now excluded it from the revised list as it relates to the reimbursement of lost pay for strike action undertaken in November 2019 – January 2020 that predated the outbreak of COVID here. Therefore it has now been removed from the Annex.

When the list was compiled in March, it included all COVID-19 Schemes delivered under Ministerial Directions at that time. However, further Ministerial Directions have issued for COVID-19 schemes since the Assembly Question was initially answered. The list in Annex A has therefore been updated to include these additional Ministerial Directions.

As I advised previously, my department is currently working on enhanced guidance to clarify the process to be followed in respect of Ministerial Directions. Guidance on the publishing of Ministerial Directions issued on 2 April under the cover of DAO 02/21.

Please accept my apology for the errors in the earlier response and I hope you will find this updated position helpful. I note you have issued a further question on the costs to date of these schemes. We have asked departments to provide this and I will forward the response once it is completed.

**Annex A**

#### List of COVID-19 Schemes approved to date under Ministerial Direction for 2019-20 and 2020-21.

Department	COVID-19 Scheme
The Executive Office	Support for Travel Agents
Department for Infrastructure	City of Derry Airport
Department of Finance	COVID Temporary time limited financial support for Belfast International Airport and Belfast City Airport
Department of Finance	Extension of the financial support Agreed for Derry City and Strabane District to all areas (Localised Restrictions Support Scheme)
Department of Finance	£50,000 grant for large businesses unable to access grant funding during the first lockdown

<b>Department</b>	<b>COVID-19 Scheme</b>
Department of Finance	£25,000 payment to manufacturing businesses unable to access grant funding during the first lockdown
Department of Finance	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
Department for the Economy	COVID-19 £10k Business Support Grant Scheme
Department for the Economy	COVID-19 £25k Business Support Scheme for Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure
Department for the Economy	COVID Microbusiness Hardship Scheme
Department for the Economy	COVID Restrictions Business Support Scheme including Extensions and Evidence Threshold
Department for the Economy	Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme
Department for the Economy	Newly Self-employed Scheme
Department for the Economy	Limited Company Director Scheme
Department for the Economy	Bed & Breakfast, Guest House and Guest Accommodation Providers Support Scheme
Department for the Economy	Large Tourism and Hospitality Scheme including extension
Department for the Economy	Student Disruption Payment
Department of Health	£500 Bonus Scheme for health and social care staff
Department of Health	Special Recognition Payment to healthcare students
Department of Health	Additional Financial Support to DoH core grant-funded organisations in 2020/21
Department of Health	Air Ambulance NI
Department of Health	Grant Scheme to Support Carers
Department of Health	Grant Scheme to Support Cancer Services
Department of Health	Grant Scheme to Support Mental Health Services
Department of Health	Payment of £1.3m to Hospices
Department of Health	One-Off Award to HSC Charitable Trust Funds
Department of Education	Free School Meals in Special Schools – direct payments for all entitled pupils in addition to provision for those in school during period of partial closures and low attendance (25 Jan to 12 Feb 2021)
Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	Scheme to compensate Lough Neagh fishermen who have been adversely affected by COVID-19
Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	COVID-19 Disruption payment of £60 to CAFRE students to address digital poverty
Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	COVID-19 support scheme for wool producers
Department for Communities	£500 Recognition payment for Supporting People and Homelessness Sector Workers

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 14 May 2021

## Revised Written Answer

### Department of Finance

*In this Bound Volume, page WA 135 replace the answer given for AQW 17221/17-22 with:*

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Finance which Executive Departments, including arm's-length bodies and non-departmental public bodies, pay Corporation Tax.

**(AQW 17221/17-22)**

**Mr C Murphy:** The table below provides details of Executive Departments, including arm's-length bodies and non-departmental public bodies that pay Corporation Tax.

Department	Name of body that pays Corporation Tax
Department of Justice	The Police Service of Northern Ireland
	Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust
	Probation Board for Northern Ireland
Department of Education	General Teaching Council for NI
	Middletown Centre for Autism Ltd
Department for Communities	NI Housing Executive
The Executive Office	Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation
	Strategic Investment Board Ltd
Department of Finance	None
Department for Infrastructure	NI Water
	NI Transport Holding Company (Translink)
	Belfast Harbour,
	Warrenpoint Harbour
	Londonderry Port
Department of Health	NI Fire and Rescue Services
DAERA	Agri-Food Biosciences Institute
	NI Fishery Harbour Authority
	Livestock Meat Commission
Department for the Economy	Invest Northern Ireland
	Tourism Northern Ireland

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 28 May 2021

## Revised Written Answer

### The Executive Office

*In this Bound Volume, page WA 214 replace the answer given for AQW 5892/17-22 with:*

**Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what are the agreed terms of reference for the Joint Board established under New Decade, New Approach.  
**(AQW 5892/17-22)**

**Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:** The agreed Terms of Reference for the Joint Board established under New Decade, New Approach are as follows:

#### Terms of Reference for the Joint Board

##### Purpose

1. As a condition of the UK Government's financial support for the Northern Ireland Executive alongside the New Decade, New Approach agreement, a Joint Board of the Executive and UK Government is to be convened.
2. The Joint Board does not replace the regular engagement between HM Treasury and the Northern Ireland Department of Finance reflecting the devolution settlement. The Board does, however, provide a regular opportunity for the Secretary of State, the First Minister and deputy First Minister; and other Ministers as appropriate, to review the use of NDNA funding and related issues, ensuring the conditions of the funding are met.
3. Its purpose is to:
  - to support the Northern Ireland Executive in establishing sound and stable governance that deliver for the people of Northern Ireland;
  - review funding provided by the UKG to meet commitments set out in the NDNA agreement;
  - support transformation in health, education and justice through the NDNA funding package; and
  - consider the effectiveness of infrastructure delivery, drawing on expertise from the Infrastructure and Projects Authority as appropriate.

##### Composition

4. The standing members of the Joint Board will be:
  - The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (who will convene the Joint Board)
  - The First Minister and deputy First Minister
5. Other Ministers from the UK Government and the NI Executive may be invited to attend as appropriate.
6. A small number of senior officials may attend in support of Ministers by agreement.

# Journal of Proceedings



# Minutes of Proceedings





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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 4 May 2021

*The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.*

## 1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

## 2. Speaker's Business

The Speaker informed Members that Mr Gary Middleton would not introduce the Adjournment topic at the conclusion of the day's business, and that the sitting would adjourn immediately after the motion to approve the corporate insolvency regulations.

## 3. Matter of the Day

### 3.1 Centenary of Northern Ireland

Mr Jim Allister, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the Centenary of Northern Ireland. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

## 4. Executive Committee Business

### 4.1 Consideration Stage: Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 7/17-22)

*Minister for Communities*

The Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, moved the Consideration Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill (NIA 7/17-22).

Twenty amendments were tabled to the Bill and selected for debate.

#### **Clauses**

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 1 and 2 stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 3 to 6 stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 7 to 12 stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 13 to 19 stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 20 to 33 stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 34 and 35 stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 36 to 40 stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clause 41 stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 42 to 45 stand part of the Bill.

#### **Schedules**

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Schedule 1 stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Schedule 2 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 1 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 2 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 3 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 4 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 5 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 6 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 7 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 8 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 9 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 10 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 11 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 12 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 13 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 14 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 15 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 16 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 17 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 18 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 19 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 20 to Schedule 3 was **made** without division.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Schedule 3, as amended, stand part of the Bill.

#### **Long Title**

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that the Long Title stand part of the Bill.

NIA Bill 07/17-2 stood referred to the Speaker.

*The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.*

#### **4.2 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021**

##### **Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

*The Executive Office*

#### **Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021**

##### **Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

*The Executive Office*

**Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021****Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

*The Executive Office*

**Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021****Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

*The Executive Office*

**Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021****Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

*The Executive Office*

*A single debate ensued on all five motions.*

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.50pm.*

*The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.*

## 5. Question Time

### 5.1 The Executive Office

Questions were put to, and answered by, the deputy First Minister, Mrs Michelle O'Neill. The junior Minister, Mr Declan Kearney, also answered a number of questions.

### 5.2 Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots.

*The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.*

## 6. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

### 6.1 Motion: The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Proposed:**

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

*Minister for the Economy*

*Debate ensued.*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

## 7. Adjournment

**Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

*The Speaker*

*The Assembly adjourned at 3.45pm.*

**Mr Alex Maskey**

The Speaker

4 May 2021

# Northern Ireland Assembly

## Papers Presented to the Assembly on 28 April 2021 to 4 May 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  
CJI Business Plan incorporating the Inspection Programme for 2021-22 (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland)
5. Assembly Reports  
Report on Capacity and Capability in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NIA 97/17-22) (Public Accounts Committee)  
Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Thirty-sixth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 98/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules  
SR 2021/114 The Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (The Executive Office)  
SR 2021/115 The Damages (Personal Injury) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Justice)  
SR 2021/116 The Rates (Coronavirus) (Emergency Relief) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)  
SR 2021/117 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)  
**For information only**  
Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/109 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)  
SR 2021/113 (C.2) The Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (Commencement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Assembly Commission)
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 4 May 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	04/05/21			

<b>Title &amp; NIA Bill Number</b>	<b>First Stage</b>	<b>Second Stage</b>	<b>Comm. Stage to Conclude</b>	<b>Report Ordered to be Printed</b>	<b>CS</b>	<b>FCS</b>	<b>Final Stage</b>	<b>Royal Assent</b>
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**

<b>Title &amp; NIA Bill Number</b>	<b>First Stage</b>	<b>Second Stage</b>	<b>Comm. Stage to Conclude</b>	<b>Report Ordered to be Printed</b>	<b>CS</b>	<b>FCS</b>	<b>Final Stage</b>	<b>Royal Assent</b>
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 4 May 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 4 May 2021:

Steve Aiken	Liz Kimmins
Andy Allen	Naomi Long
Martina Anderson	Gordon Lyons
Caoimhe Archibald	Séan Lynch
Kellie Armstrong	Chris Lyttle
Rosemary Barton	Nichola Mallon
Roy Beggs	Declan McAleer
Cathal Boylan	Fra McCann
Paula Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Sinead 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
Sinead Ennis	Michelle O'Neill
Arlene Foster	Edwin Poots
Órlaithí Flynn	George Robinson
Colm Gildernew	Emma Rogan
Paul Givan	Pat Sheehan
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Sheerin
Harry Harvey	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	John Stewart
William Irwin	Mervyn Storey
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir
Gerry Kelly	



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# Northern Ireland Assembly

**Monday 10 May 2021**

*The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.*

## 1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

## 2. Executive Committee Business

### 2.1 Motion: The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

#### **Proposed:**

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 be affirmed.

*Minister of Finance*

*Debate ensued.*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

## 3. Private Members' Business

### 3.1 Second Stage: Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22)

Ms Clare Bailey moved the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22).

*Debate ensued.*

*The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.*

*The debate stood suspended for Question Time.*

*The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.*

## 4. Question Time

### 4.1 Communities

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey.

*The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.*

### 4.2 Economy

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds.

*The Speaker took the Chair.*

## 5. Assembly Business

### 5.1 Motion: Extension of Sitting on Monday 10 May 2021 under Standing Order 10(3A)

**Proposed:**

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 10 May 2021 be extended to no later than 8:00pm.

*Mr Keith Buchanan*

*Mr John O'Dowd*

*Mrs Dolores Kelly*

*Mr Robbie Butler*

*Ms Kellie Armstrong*

*Ms Clare Bailey*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

## 6. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

### 6.1 Second Stage: Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22) (cont'd)

*Debate resumed.*

The Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22) passed Second Stage (Division).

## 7. Adjournment

**Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

*The Speaker*

*The Assembly adjourned at 8.18pm.*

**Mr Alex Maskey**

The Speaker

10 May 2021

# Northern Ireland Assembly

10 May 2021

## Division 1

### Second Stage: Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22)

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

**Ayes:** 58

**Noes:** 29

#### AYES

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, 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 Wells, Miss Woods.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.*

#### NOES

*Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P 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 Storey, Mr Weir.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Givan, Mr Harvey.*

The Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22) passed Second Stage.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan [Teller, Noes], Mr Harvey [Teller, Noes], Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

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

# Northern Ireland Assembly

## Papers Presented to the Assembly on 5 May 2021 to 10 May 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  
Maze Long Kesh Development Corporation Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (The Executive Office)
5. Assembly Reports  
Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Thirty-seventh Report of Session 2020–2021 (NIA 99/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules  
Draft SR - The Police Act 1997 (Criminal Record Certificates: Relevant Matters) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Justice)  
  
SR 2021/118 The Housing Benefit and Universal Credit (Care Leavers and Homeless) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)  
  
SR 2021/119 The Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)  
  
**For information only**  
Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/117 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)
7. Written Ministerial Statements  
JCVI Announcement on the Astra Zeneca Vaccine (Minister of Health)
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications  
The Pollution Prevention and Control (District Councils) Charging Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)  
  
Northern Ireland Civil Service 2019 Workforce Review including The Review of Fair Participation and The Review of Gender (Department of Finance)
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

## Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 10 May 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 10 May 2021:

Steve Aiken	Naomi Long
Andy Allen	Trevor Lunn
Martina Anderson	Gordon Lyons
Caoimhe Archibald	Séan Lynch
Kellie Armstrong	Chris Lyttle
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradley	Declan McAleer
Sinead Bradley	Fra McCann
Paula Bradshaw	Daniel McCrossan
Nicola Brogan	Patsy McGlone
Thomas Buchanan	Colin McGrath
Joanne Bunting	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
Arlene Foster	Carál Ní Chuilín
Órlaithí Flynn	Michelle O'Neill
Colm Gildernew	Edwin Poots
Paul Givan	George Robinson
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Rogan
Harry Harvey	Pat Sheehan
Cara Hunter	Emma Sheerin
William Irwin	Christopher Stalford
Declan Kearney	John Stewart
Dolores Kelly	Mervyn Storey
Gerry Kelly	Robin Swann
Liz Kimmins	Peter Weir





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# Northern Ireland Assembly

**Tuesday 11 May 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: Redevelopment of CAFRE's Greenmount and Loughry Campuses and the Development of New Beef Facilities at AFBI and CAFRE**

The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots, made a statement regarding the Redevelopment of CAFRE's Greenmount and Loughry Campuses and the Development of New Beef Facilities at AFBI and CAFRE, following which he replied to questions.

*The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.*

## 3. Private Members' Business

### 3.1 **Motion: Autism Strategy**

#### **Proposed:**

That this Assembly notes with deep concern that, by the end of 2020, almost 4,500 children across Health and Social Care Trusts were awaiting diagnosis for autism, with some reportedly waiting more than 2 years; recognises the distress and harm that this places on those awaiting diagnosis and tailored support services, as well as on their families; expresses its concern at the growing inequality of access to autism services and diagnosis; further notes the stark difference in waiting times across Health and Social Care Trusts; and calls on the Minister of Health to bring forward a longer-term strategy, to be progressed urgently in partnership with those with autism, their families, carers, and community and voluntary sector organisations, to ensure equality of care and services that are free at the point of access and based on need.

*Mr Colm Gildernew  
Ms Cáral Ní Chuilín  
Ms Órlaithí Flynn  
Ms Karen Mullan*

**Amendment****Proposed:**

Leave out all after the first 'awaiting' and insert:

"a diagnostic assessment for autism, with some reportedly waiting more than 2 years which exceeds the autism assessment standard of 13 weeks from the point of the initial referral; recognises the distress and harm that this places on those awaiting diagnosis and tailored support services, as well as on their families; expresses its concern at the growing inequality of access to autism services and diagnosis; further notes the stark difference in waiting times across Health and Social Care Trusts; and calls on the Minister of Health to bring forward a longer-term strategy which sets out measurable targets against which its successes may be assessed by an independent body, to be progressed urgently in partnership with those with autism, their families, carers, and community and voluntary sector organisations, to ensure equality of care and services that are free at the point of access and based on need."

*Mrs Pam Cameron*

*Mr Jonathan Buckley*

*Ms Paula Bradley*

*Debate ensued.*

The Question being put, the amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion as amended was **carried**.

**3.2 Motion: Strategies to Protect Peatlands and Woodlands****Proposed:**

That this Assembly pays tribute to the heroic efforts by those emergency service personnel from across these islands and the local community who responded to the recent wildfires in the Mourne; notes the importance of preserving the natural environment for improving air quality, biodiversity, carbon capture and combatting the climate emergency; further notes the importance of both rewilding and protecting peatlands in tackling the climate emergency; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to produce fully resourced strategies and implementation plans to protect, preserve and enhance our peatlands and woodlands without further delay.

*Mr Patsy McGlone*

*Mrs Dolores Kelly*

*Mr Colin McGrath*

*Ms Sinead Bradley*

*Debate ensued.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.56pm.*

*The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, in the Chair.*

**4. Question Time****4.1 Education**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

**5. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)****5.1 Motion: Strategies to Protect Peatlands and Woodlands (cont'd)**

*Debate resumed.*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

*The Speaker took the Chair.*

## 6. Adjournment

**Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

*The Speaker*

Ms Jemma Dolan spoke to her topic regarding the Enniskillen Bypass and A4 Upgrade.

*The Assembly adjourned at 4.36pm.*

**Mr Alex Maskey**

The Speaker

11 May 2021

# Northern Ireland Assembly

## Papers Presented to the Assembly on 11 May 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 on the Estimates of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman 2021-22 (NIA 95/17-22) (Audit Committee)
6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/120 The Whole of Government Accounts (Designation of Bodies) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/121 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)
7. Written Ministerial Statements

The A4 Enniskillen Bypass (Department for Infrastructure)
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 11 May 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	04/05/21			

<b>Title &amp; NIA Bill Number</b>	<b>First Stage</b>	<b>Second Stage</b>	<b>Comm. Stage to Conclude</b>	<b>Report Ordered to be Printed</b>	<b>CS</b>	<b>FCS</b>	<b>Final Stage</b>	<b>Royal Assent</b>
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**

<b>Title &amp; NIA Bill Number</b>	<b>First Stage</b>	<b>Second Stage</b>	<b>Comm. Stage to Conclude</b>	<b>Report Ordered to be Printed</b>	<b>CS</b>	<b>FCS</b>	<b>Final Stage</b>	<b>Royal Assent</b>
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	10/05/21	26/06/21					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

## Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 11 May 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 11 May 2021:

Steve Aiken	Naomi Long
Andy Allen	Gordon Lyons
Martina Anderson	Séan Lynch
Caoimhe Archibald	Chris Lyttle
Kellie Armstrong	Nichola Mallon
Roy Beggs	Declan McAleer
Cathal Boylan	Fra McCann
Paula Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Sinead Bradley	Patsy McGlone
Paula Bradshaw	Philip McGuigan
Nicola Brogan	Maolíosa McHugh
Keith Buchanan	Sinead McLaughlin
Pat Catney	Justin McNulty
Alan Chambers	Andrew Muir
Stewart Dickson	Karen Mullan
Linda Dillon	Conor Murphy
Diane Dodds	Mike Nesbitt
Jemma Dolan	Robin Newton
Gordon Dunne	Carál Ní Chuilín
Mark Durkan	John O'Dowd
Alex Easton	Michelle O'Neill
Arlene Foster	Matthew O'Toole
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
Cara Hunter	Christopher Stalford
William Irwin	John Stewart
Declan Kearney	Mervyn Storey
Dolores Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir
Liz Kimmins	



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# Northern Ireland Assembly

**Monday 17 May 2021**

*The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.*

## 1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

## 2. Matters of the Day

### 2.1 Inquest into Ballymurphy Massacre

Mr Pat Sheehan, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the Inquest into the Ballymurphy Massacre. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

### 2.2 Breaches of International Law in Palestine by Israel

Ms Emma Sheerin, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on Breaches of International Law in Palestine by Israel. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

*The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.*

## 3. Executive Committee Business

### 3.1 Statement: Awarding Arrangements for CCEA Qualifications in Academic Year 2021-22

The Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, made a statement regarding Awarding Arrangements for CCEA Qualifications in Academic Year 2021-22, following which he replied to questions.

### 3.2 Further Consideration Stage: Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 7/17-22)

The Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, moved the Further Consideration Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 7/17-22).

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

NIA Bill 7/17-22 stood referred to the Speaker for consideration 7 in accordance with Section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

### 3.3 Motion: The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Suspension of Liability for Wrongful Trading) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

#### **Proposed:**

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Suspension of Liability for Wrongful Trading) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

*Minister for the Economy*

*Debate ensued.*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

*The Speaker took the Chair.*

## 4. Question Time

### 4.1 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.

### 4.2 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy.

## 5. Committee Business

### 5.1 Motion: Extension of Committee Stage: Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 20/17-22)

#### Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 January 2022, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill.

*Chairperson, Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

*The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.*

## 6. Private Members' Business

### 6.1 Motion: Unfettered Access to Medicines and Medical Devices

#### Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of retaining unfettered access to the United Kingdom internal market for medicines and medical devices; notes that 98 per cent of the medicines used in Northern Ireland are supplied from Great Britain; recalls that the barriers to trade in this area, imposed by the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, are yet another reason why the Protocol should be replaced; rejects the establishment of regulatory and customs controls on medicines moving between Great Britain and Northern Ireland; highlights that, if established, these arrangements would add cost for businesses and public services, restrict supply and jeopardise patient care across Northern Ireland; regrets that some GB firms have already severed ties with the Northern Ireland market; expresses grave concern that existing grace periods are due to end on 1 October 2021 and 1 January 2022 in the absence of a solution; and calls on the Minister of Health to work with his Executive colleagues to resist strongly disruption to East-West trade for medicines and medical products in all circumstances.

*Mrs Pam Cameron  
Mr Jonathan Buckley*

*Debate ensued*

The Question being put, the motion was **negatived** (Division).

*The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.*

## 7. Assembly Business

### 7.1 Motion: Extension of Sitting on Monday 17 May 2021 under Standing Order 10(3A)

#### Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 17 May 2021 be extended to no later than 7:30pm.

*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**.

## 8. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

### 8.1 Motion: Ending Religious Discrimination in Teaching Appointments

**Proposed:**

That this Assembly notes the exemption in fair employment law allowing discrimination on the grounds of religious belief when appointing teachers; acknowledges that it is unacceptable that teachers should be excluded from protection from discrimination in employment on the grounds of religious belief; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to repeal urgently this exemption to ensure equal opportunities in employment are afforded to all without exception.

*Mr Mike Nesbitt*  
*Mr Robbie Butler*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

## 9. Adjournment

**Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

*The Speaker*

*The Assembly adjourned at 6.26pm.*

**Mr Alex Maskey**  
The Speaker

17 May 2021

# Northern Ireland Assembly

17 May 2021

## Division

### Motion: Unfettered Access to Medicines and Medical Devices

#### Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of retaining unfettered access to the United Kingdom internal market for medicines and medical devices; notes that 98 per cent of the medicines used in Northern Ireland are supplied from Great Britain; recalls that the barriers to trade in this area, imposed by the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, are yet another reason why the Protocol should be replaced; rejects the establishment of regulatory and customs controls on medicines moving between Great Britain and Northern Ireland; highlights that, if established, these arrangements would add cost for businesses and public services, restrict supply and jeopardise patient care across Northern Ireland; regrets that some GB firms have already severed ties with the Northern Ireland market; expresses grave concern that existing grace periods are due to end on 1 October 2021 and 1 January 2022 in the absence of a solution; and calls on the Minister of Health to work with his Executive colleagues to resist strongly disruption to East-West trade for medicines and medical products in all circumstances.

*Mrs Pam Cameron  
Mr Jonathan Buckley*

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

**Ayes:** 38

**Noes:** 46

#### AYES

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Buckley, Mr Middleton.*

#### NOES

*Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, 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, 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 Noes: Mr Gildernew, Mr Sheehan.*

The motion was **negatived**.

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

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

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

Mr Butler voted for Mr 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, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew [Teller, Noes], 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, Noes] and Ms Sheerin.

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

# Northern Ireland Assembly

## Papers Presented to the Assembly on 12 May 2021 to 17 May 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

Draft Code of Practice issued under section 195T of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Department of Justice)

Draft Code of Practice issued under section 303I of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Department of Justice)

Draft Code of Practice issued under section 377ZA of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Department of Justice)

Draft Code of Practice issued under section 293A of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Department of Justice)

### 5. Assembly Reports

Report on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA 100/17-22) (Committee for Communities)

Report on Driver and Vehicle Agency 2019-20 (NIA 101/17-22) (Public Accounts Agency)

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Thirty-eighth Report of Session 2020–2021 (NIA 102/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

### 6. Statutory Rules

Draft SR - The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Search, Seizure and Detention of Property: Code of Practice) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Justice)

Draft SR - The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Cash Searches: Code of Practice) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Justice)

Draft SR - The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Investigations: Code of Practice) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Justice)

Draft SR - The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Recovery of Listed Assets: Code of Practice) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Justice)

Draft SR - The Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (Relevant Benefits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Justice)

SR 2021/124 The Lake Street, Lurgan (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/125 The Common, Markethill Road, Newtownhamilton (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/126 The Dunbar Link and Great Patrick Street, Belfast (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/127 The Official Statistics (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

#### For information only

SR 2021/122 The On-Street Parking (Residents Parking Zone – Rugby Road/ College Park Avenue Area, Belfast) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/123 The Road Races (Croft Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/128 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Crumlin) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/121 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

## 7. Written Ministerial Statements

Decisions of the Executive on COVID-19, 13 May 2021 (The Executive Office)

An inspection into the Police Service of Northern Ireland's handling of the Bobby Storey funeral on 30 June 2020 (Minister of Justice)

## 8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on a proposal to revoke the Agricultural Wages (Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (Abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board) (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Public Consultation on the Housing Supply Strategy (Department for Communities)

## 9. Departmental Publications

The Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.32) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Education)

Correction slip for Northern Ireland Local Government Commissioner for Standards Annual Report 2019-20 (Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman)

## 10. Agency Publications

## 11. Westminster Publications

## 12. Miscellaneous Publications

## Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 17 May 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 17 May 2021:

Steve Aiken	Gerry Kelly
Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Kellie Armstrong	Séan Lynch
Rosemary Barton	Chris Lyttle
Doug Beattie	Nichola Mallon
Roy Beggs	Declan McAleer
John Blair	Fra McCann
Cathal Boylan	Daniel McCrossan
Paula Bradley	Patsy McGlone
Sinead Bradley	Philip McGuigan
Paula Bradshaw	Maoliosa McHugh
Nicola Brogan	Michelle McIlveen
Thomas Buchanan	Sinead McLaughlin
Joanne Bunting	Justin McNulty
Pat Catney	Gary Middleton
Alan Chambers	Andrew Muir
Linda Dillon	Karen Mullan
Diane Dodds	Conor Murphy
Jemma Dolan	Mike Nesbitt
Gordon Dunne	Robin Newton
Mark Durkan	Carál Ní Chuilín
Alex Easton	Michelle O'Neill
Sinead Ennis	Matthew O'Toole
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



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# Northern Ireland Assembly

**Tuesday 18 May 2021**

*The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.*

## 1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

## 2. Matter of the Day

### 2.1 HMICFRS Inspection of the PSNI's Handling of the Bobby Storey Funeral

Mr Mervyn Storey, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the HMICFRS Inspection of the PSNI's Handling of the Bobby Storey Funeral. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

## 3. Executive Committee Business

### 3.1 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

*The Executive Office*

### Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

*The Executive Office*

*A single debate ensued on both motions.*

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

*The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.*

## 4. Committee Business

### 4.1 Motion: Mental Health Awareness Week

**Proposed:**

That this Assembly notes that the week commencing 10 May was Mental Health Awareness Week, which annually provides the opportunity to highlight the importance of mental health; further notes the 2021 Health Inequalities Report which identified continuing mental health inequalities; recognises the detrimental impact that COVID-19 has had on the mental health and wellbeing of the population, including our children and young people; further recognises the positive public health campaigns around mental health, such as Take 5; advocates that people seek support to talk about their mental health; and supports the Minister of Health to achieve parity of esteem between mental and physical health by increasing spending on mental health services, fully implementing the Protect Life 2 strategy and progressing the 10 year Mental Health and Substance Use strategies.

*Chairperson, Committee for Health*

*Debate ensued.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.57pm.*

*The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.*

## 5. Question Time

### 5.1 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann.

## 6. Committee Business (Cont'd)

### 6.1 Motion: Mental Health Awareness Week (cont'd)

*Debate resumed.*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

*The Speaker took the Chair.*

## 7. Private Members' Business

### 7.1 Motion: Public Inquiry into the Murder of Human Rights Lawyer Pat Finucane

**Proposed:**

That this Assembly notes it is 31 years since the murder of human rights lawyer, Pat Finucane, and almost 20 years since the British Government committed to a full and independent public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the murder; further notes the Supreme Court ruling that there has not been an Article 2 compliant inquiry into the murder; is concerned at the refusal of the British Government to hold the public inquiry which it promised; is further concerned that the British Government's approach risks undermining wider confidence in the rule of law and the administration of justice; reiterates that a public inquiry is the most effective means to get the truth about the scope and extent of state collusion in this murder; urges the British Government, in the public interest, to reconsider its response to the Supreme Court ruling; recognises, on March 12th 2021, the reopening of supervision by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers into the murder of Pat Finucane; further recognises the significance of this unusual step by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers which acknowledged with profound concern the delay in ongoing legacy cases generally whilst resuming supervision of measures by the UK government in order to ensure they are adequate, sufficient and timely; calls on the British Government to establish the Historical Investigations Unit and the other Stormont House Agreement legacy mechanisms so that families of all victims have access to human rights compliant investigations; and further calls on the British Government to initiate the independent, public inquiry it promised to the family of Pat Finucane in 2001.

*Mrs Michelle O'Neill*

*Mrs Dolores Kelly*

*Mr Gerry Kelly*

*Ms Linda Dillon*

*Debate ensued.*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** (Division).

*The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.*

## 8. Adjournment

**Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

*The Speaker*

Dr Steve Aiken spoke to his topic regarding Opposition to a waste incinerator from the residents of Hightown, Mallusk and South Antrim.

*The Assembly adjourned at 5.42pm.*

**Mr Alex Maskey**

The Speaker

18 May 2021

# Northern Ireland Assembly

18 May 2021

## Division

### Motion: Public Inquiry into the Murder of Human Rights Lawyer Pat Finucane

#### Proposed:

That this Assembly notes it is 31 years since the murder of human rights lawyer, Pat Finucane, and almost 20 years since the British Government committed to a full and independent public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the murder; further notes the Supreme Court ruling that there has not been an Article 2 compliant inquiry into the murder; is concerned at the refusal of the British Government to hold the public inquiry which it promised; is further concerned that the British Government's approach risks undermining wider confidence in the rule of law and the administration of justice; reiterates that a public inquiry is the most effective means to get the truth about the scope and extent of state collusion in this murder; urges the British Government, in the public interest, to reconsider its response to the Supreme Court ruling; recognises, on March 12th 2021, the reopening of supervision by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers into the murder of Pat Finucane; further recognises the significance of this unusual step by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers which acknowledged with profound concern the delay in ongoing legacy cases generally whilst resuming supervision of measures by the UK government in order to ensure they are adequate, sufficient and timely; calls on the British Government to establish the Historical Investigations Unit and the other Stormont House Agreement legacy mechanisms so that families of all victims have access to human rights compliant investigations; and further calls on the British Government to initiate the independent, public inquiry it promised to the family of Pat Finucane in 2001.

*Mrs Michelle O'Neill*

*Mrs Dolores Kelly*

*Mr Gerry Kelly*

*Ms Linda Dillon*

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

**Ayes:** 48

**Noes:** 38

#### 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 Dillon, Ms Ennis.*

#### NOES

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Frew, Mr Nesbitt.*

The motion was **carried**.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt [Teller, Noes], Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

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

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

# Northern Ireland Assembly

## Papers Presented to the Assembly on 18 May 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  
2019/20 Annual Report of the Certification Officer for Northern Ireland (Department for the Economy)
5. Assembly Reports  
Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Thirty-Ninth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 103/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules  
**For Information only**  
Revised Explanatory Memorandum for Draft SR The Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)
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 18 May 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	04/05/21	17/05/21		

<b>Title &amp; NIA Bill Number</b>	<b>First Stage</b>	<b>Second Stage</b>	<b>Comm. Stage to Conclude</b>	<b>Report Ordered to be Printed</b>	<b>CS</b>	<b>FCS</b>	<b>Final Stage</b>	<b>Royal Assent</b>
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	28/01/22					



**2017-2022 Mandate****Non-Executive Bills**

<b>Title &amp; NIA Bill Number</b>	<b>First Stage</b>	<b>Second Stage</b>	<b>Comm. Stage to Conclude</b>	<b>Report Ordered to be Printed</b>	<b>CS</b>	<b>FCS</b>	<b>Final Stage</b>	<b>Royal Assent</b>
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	10/05/21	22/06/21					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

## Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 18 May 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 18 May 2021:

Steve Aiken	Gerry Kelly
Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Kellie Armstrong	Séan Lynch
Rosemary Barton	Chris Lyttle
Roy Beggs	Nichola Mallon
Cathal Boylan	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Sinead Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Paula Bradshaw	Patsy McGlone
Nicola Brogan	Philip McGuigan
Tom Buchanan	Maoliosa McHugh
Joanne Bunting	Sinead McLaughlin
Pat Catney	Justin McNulty
Alan Chambers	Gary Middleton
Stewart Dickson	Andrew Muir
Linda Dillon	Karen Mullan
Diane Dodds	Conor Murphy
Jemma Dolan	Mike Nesbitt
Gordon Dunne	Robin Newton
Mark Durkan	Carál Ní Chuilín
Alex Easton	Michelle O'Neill
Sinead Ennis	Matthew O'Toole
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

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

**Monday 24 May 2021**

*The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.*

## 1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

## 2. Executive Committee Business

### 3.1 Motion: The draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Proposed:**

That the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

*Minister for the Economy*

*Debate ensued.*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

## 3. Committee Business

### 3.1 Motion: Extension of Committee Stage: Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22)

**Proposed:**

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 17 December 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Climate Change Bill [NIA Bill 19/17-22].

*Chairperson, Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

*The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.*

### 3.2 Motion: Restrictive Intervention and Seclusion of Children and Young People with Additional Support Needs

**Proposed:**

That this Assembly expresses concern at the lack of statutory guidance from the Department of Education on the use of restrictive intervention on children and young people, particularly those who have additional support needs, including those with physical or learning disabilities or who are neurodivergent; calls on the Minister of Education to develop and introduce, in partnership with teachers, parents and all other relevant stakeholders, up-to-date statutory guidance on therapeutic-based, non-aversive, positive behaviour strategies; and further calls on the Minister to fund mandatory training on this approach for all staff working directly with children and young people, provide statutory guidance on restraint definitions, last resort definitions, and human rights based guidance in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, introduce mandatory recording and reporting of all incidents of restrictive intervention and abolish the use of isolation rooms.

*Chairperson, Committee for Education*

*Debate ensued.*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

*The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.*

## 4. Private Members' Business

### 4.1 Motion: Green New Deal

#### **Proposed:**

That this Assembly recognises that recovery from the pandemic and tackling the climate crisis go hand in hand, requiring an investment-led, green recovery that delivers on social and economic justice and rapidly decarbonises our economy; and calls on the Executive to deliver a Green New Deal which will create an equitable, sustainable economy filled with well-paid, secure, low-carbon jobs in care, education and health as well as in industry and infrastructure, and to ensure wellbeing and inclusion are at the centre of government decision making.

*Mr Stewart Dickson*

*Mr John Blair*

*Mr Andrew Muir*

*Ms Paula Bradshaw*

*Debate ensued.*

*The debate stood suspended for Question Time.*

*The Speaker took the Chair.*

## 5. Question Time

### 5.1 Infrastructure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon.

### 5.2 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long.

*The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.*

## 6. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

### 6.1 Motion: Green New Deal (cont'd)

*Debate resumed.*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

## 7. Adjournment

#### **Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

*The Speaker*

*The Assembly adjourned at 4.36pm.*

**Mr Alex Maskey**

The Speaker

24 May 2021

# Northern Ireland Assembly

## Papers Presented to the Assembly on 19 May 2021 to 24 May 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

2021-22 Budget (Department of Finance)

Legislative Consent Memorandum: Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill (Department for the Economy)

IntertradeIreland Annual Report and Accounts 2019 (Department for the Economy)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/129 The Rules of the Court of Judicature (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/130 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/131 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

Draft SR - The Administration (Restrictions on Disposal etc. to Connected Persons) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2021/132 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

### For information only

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/130 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

May 2021 Covid-19 Funding (Minister of Finance)

Decisions of the Executive on COVID-19, 20 May 2021 (The Executive Office)

8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

## Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 24 May 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 24 May 2021:

Steve Aiken	Gerry Kelly
Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
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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





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# Northern Ireland Assembly

**Tuesday 25 May 2021**

*The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.*

## 1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

## 2. Executive Committee Business

### 2.1 **Statement: North South Ministerial Council Transport Sectoral Meeting**

The Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council Transport Sectoral Meeting, following which she replied to questions.

### 2.2 **Motion: Budget 2021-2022**

#### **Proposed:**

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2021-2022 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 1 April 2021 and the further detailed information laid on 27 April 2021.

*Minister of Finance*

#### **Amendment**

#### **Proposed:**

Leave out all after 'information' and insert:

"provided to Members on 27 April 2021 and laid on 19 May 2021."

*Minister of Finance*

*Debate ensued.*

*The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.53pm.*

*The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.*

## 3. Question Time

### 3.1 **Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots.

*The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.*

## 4. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

### 4.1 Motion: Budget 2021-2022 (cont'd)

*Debate resumed.*

The Question being put, the amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion as amended, was **carried** with cross-community support (Division).

*The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.*

## 5. Adjournment

### **Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

*The Speaker*

Mr Gordon Lyons spoke to his topic regarding the School Estate in East Antrim.

*The Assembly adjourned at 5.26pm.*

**Mr Alex Maskey**

The Speaker

25 May 2021

# Northern Ireland Assembly

25 May 2021

## Division

**Motion: Budget 2021-2022 (As amended)**

**Proposed:**

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2021-2022 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 1 April 2021 and the further detailed information provided to Members on 27 April 2021 and laid on 19 May 2021.

*Minister of Finance*

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

**Ayes:** 80

**Noes:** 5

### AYES

#### Nationalist

*Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Brogan, Mr Catney, 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, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.*

#### Unionist

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.*

#### Other

*Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald, Ms Dolan.*

### NOES

#### Unionist

*Mr Allister, Ms Sugden.*

#### Other

*Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Allister, Mr Carroll.*

Total Votes	85	Total Ayes	80	[94.1%]
Nationalist Votes	37	Nationalist Ayes	37	[100.0%]
Unionist Votes	38	Unionist Ayes	36	[94.7%]
Other Votes	10	Other Ayes	7	[70.0%]

The motion, as amended, was **carried**.

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

Mr Blair voted for Ms Armstrong, 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 Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald [Teller, Ayes], Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan [Teller, Ayes], Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, 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

## Papers Presented to the Assembly on 25 May 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
6. Statutory Rules
7. Written Ministerial Statements  
Public Lending Rights (Minister for Communities)
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 25 May 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	04/05/21	17/05/21		

<b>Title &amp; NIA Bill Number</b>	<b>First Stage</b>	<b>Second Stage</b>	<b>Comm. Stage to Conclude</b>	<b>Report Ordered to be Printed</b>	<b>CS</b>	<b>FCS</b>	<b>Final Stage</b>	<b>Royal Assent</b>
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	13/05/21				
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	28/01/22					

**2017-2022 Mandate****Non-Executive Bills**

<b>Title &amp; NIA Bill Number</b>	<b>First Stage</b>	<b>Second Stage</b>	<b>Comm. Stage to Conclude</b>	<b>Report Ordered to be Printed</b>	<b>CS</b>	<b>FCS</b>	<b>Final Stage</b>	<b>Royal Assent</b>
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	10/05/21	17/12/21					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage



## Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 25 May 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 25 May 2021:

Steve Aiken	Gerry Kelly
Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Kellie Armstrong	Séan Lynch
Rosemary Barton	Chris Lyttle
Roy Beggs	Nichola Mallon
Cathal Boylan	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Sinead Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Paula Bradshaw	Patsy McGlone
Nicola Brogan	Colin McGrath
Tom Buchanan	Philip McGuigan
Pat Catney	Maolíosa McHugh
Alan Chambers	Michelle McIlveen
Stewart Dickson	Sinead McLaughlin
Linda Dillon	Justin McNulty
Diane Dodds	Gary Middleton
Jemma Dolan	Andrew Muir
Gordon Dunne	Karen Mullan
Mark Durkan	Conor Murphy
Alex Easton	Mike Nesbitt
Sinead Ennis	Robin Newton
Arlene Foster	Carál Ní Chuilín
Órlaithí Flynn	Michelle O'Neill
Colm Gildernew	Edwin Poots
Paul Givan	George Robinson
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Rogan
Harry Harvey	Pat Sheehan
David Hilditch	Emma Sheerin
William Humphrey	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	John Stewart
William Irwin	Mervyn Storey
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir

